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CLOUDLESS MAY

BOOKS BY STORM JAMESON

Novels of Personal Life

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Company Parade

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Europe to Let

Cousin Honoré

The Fort

Then We Shall Hear Singing

Miscellaneous

Modern Drama in Europe

No Time Like the Present

Civil Journey

The End of This War (P.E.N. book)

CLOUDLESS MAY

BY
STORM JAMESON

Mai qui fut sans nuage et Juin poignardé:
ARAGON

MACMILLAN & CO. LTD.

THE BOOK SOCIETY LTD.

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September 1943*

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, EDINBURGH

For
GUY CHAPMAN
for the years and the kindness

The characters in this book are imagined though not imaginary. None of them is a portrait of any person, living or dead. Seuilly does not exist ; it includes features of several Loire towns known to the writer. Various details in the background of the story have purposely been left vague ; it seemed better to risk a charge of ignorance than to invite what would be a false identification with any town or military region ; or with any army officer or civilian official.

Chapter I

COLONEL RIENNE glanced round his room before leaving it. Unnecessary. It fitted him as closely as his uniform, nothing wasted, nothing to spare. There was not a comfortable chair in the room ; when he read — there were books — he sat upright and held the book as though he were going to read aloud. Except for these few books there was nothing but what belonged to the army, and could be handed over to the next occupant without a regret. It is true that Rienne had no private money and he provided out of his pay for an elderly sister, but his room was no more austere than the room next to it, occupied by an officer the only son of a Lyons banker.

He opened the shutters a little on this cell, to let in the slightly cooler air of early evening. There was no breeze.

Leaving the barracks he walked through side streets to the small main square of Seully. It was a fortunately-placed square, since it was open to the Loire and the double bridge across the Loire, which has here two arms lying round an island in mid-stream. Apart from this supreme piece of luck, it was a polite shabby square with two handsome buildings. It narrowed into the main street of Seully, itself shabby, lively, charming. The two buildings, the theatre and the Hôtel Buran, stood at opposite corners ; each had a side facing the river and a narrower side on the square. The large dining-room of the Hôtel Buran looked onto the Loire ; below the level of its windows, on the Quai d'Angers itself, the terrace of the small Café Buran had only the width of the quay between it and the bright water.

It was the 5th of May 1940. Seully was crammed with troops ; these included a regiment of Colonials and two armoured regiments : and with munitions, these included the newest tanks. The war in the meantime was only active in Norway : west of the Vosges and in the Saar patrols of both sides played a risky game of Red Indians. Yesterday Johann was killed, tonight it may be Jean. It was not war. Rienne, like many middle-aged soldiers, felt uneasy ; his instinct warned him that these hot cloudless days, perfect for war, were peaceful for some bad reason. Since we don't act, he

said, they will, and then . . . He believed that logic, a spirit of mockery, endurance, are the human virtues best suited to making war, and he did not think the Germans would be able to improvise them. But he feared inaction. The men had nothing to do but stretch their muscles, and his muscles are the least useful part of a soldier's equipment. Today, at any rate. The future — when we have destroyed everything — did not interest Rienne. One war at a time.

He hesitated. I'm too early, he thought, to see Émile. There was an empty table on the terrace of the Café Buran ; he seated himself and ordered, without thinking about it, a glass of the cloudy yellow Anjou wine which costs tuppence a glass. Workmen drink it.

He crossed his legs and rested a long-fingered hand on the table. He was tall and very thin. His face was sunken below prominent cheek-bones, and burned. As he stared at the Loire you noticed in his blue eyes the other-worldly look — less innocence than too much knowledge — which some soldiers and some priests have. They are men set apart by what they accept. . . . Since there was no one between him and the Loire, he smiled at it, with a natural kindness. It was worth a smile. It stretched itself in the sun, smooth, wide, saturated by an opaque light and challenging the green of the plane trees. The day had been brilliant, the twenty-eighth day without rain, without a cloud ; and the evening would be as clear. It was still hot.

Just as he was finishing his drink, a young officer approached him. Lieutenant de Saint-Jouin was not an officer Rienne liked or approved of, and he acknowledged his greeting with a coldness the young man was too interested in himself to notice.

"At last," he said, smiling, "at last — I've arranged it."

Rienne did not ask what.

"We shall have that delicious creature, Madeleine Souzy, and the handsome Jewess ; if we can get half a dozen more in the same class, we can put on a show such as no one has ever seen here. What d'you think ?"

"What are you talking about ?"

"Why, my idea ! To bring actresses here from Paris for a Monday night show, and supper afterwards. You agreed, sir, that we must do more to occupy the troops." And Jacques de Saint-Jouin put on the youthful stammer he had discovered was attractive to women and older men. Con-

fidant in his power to charm his way through any trouble, he kept strictly in reserve the insolence he had been practising since he was a child taller and better-looking than his fellows.

Colonel Rienne was not moved. "I hoped that by this time they would be occupied in fighting," he said.

"But that will come," Saint-Jouin said gaily.

Rienne beckoned the waiter over, paid, and went away without looking again at the young officer. He dismissed him from his mind. In the last war he had seen just such young men become, if not good, at least tolerable officers; when they were dying the arrogance faded a moment before their other qualities and there was nothing to set them apart from the sons of chemists and postmen.

He was on his way to see the Prefect. Émile Bergeot was his closest friend: Rienne had others, but to none of these was he bound by a link which went back forty-eight years to the day when the midwife looking after their mothers tied both infants' wrists together to the arm of a chair to keep them from rolling off it while she fought to save the life of Rienne's mother. She failed, and Mme Bergeot brought the two boys up as brothers. Rienne was the bigger and stronger; at school he protected Émile and showed him off; when later a relative left him a little money, it came naturally to him to hand Émile three-quarters of it to help him at the School of Political Science — so naturally that no one asked him why he had so much less need of money than the brilliant young law student.

To reach the Prefecture, Rienne crossed the square and walked through narrow streets. Pressed together by the houses, the warmth could not escape upwards, it was like poking your head into an oven. The houses were old and a little severe; now and then open shutters let you look through a low room into a courtyard with a well. The town looked as it had always looked; there were not more soldiers — riding-masters, dragoons, spahis, mechanics from the airfield — in the streets, and the citizens of Seuilly were not less ironically reserved. The war had not made them graver or more joyous.

The Prefecture was a fifteenth-century château, built by the second Duc de Seuilly on the cliff looking down on the Loire. The steep road climbing to it from the town had still an odd dozen houses built in the same century, under the surrounding wall. Their heavy doors and the worn ends

of beams supported too much : it was easy to imagine people dying in these rooms, as low and dark as vaults, and hard to believe that anyone could be born there and receive a first glimpse of light from these crushing and dilapidated walls. Half-way up this dark lane the carriage road to the Prefecture turned off, and climbed further to a wide courtyard with superb chestnuts. Up here all was sun and clear air, an immense arc of sky drawn above one of the most charming houses in France ; it was a very large house rather than a castle ; it was not majestic, it was perfect. Rienne walked round to the north front ; here a narrow terrace looked over the valley of the Loire, across a countryside smooth enough to reflect the sky. The trees on the island between the two arms of the river were a brilliant green ; the town itself, except for the spire of the minster, was beginning to harbour shadows. As Rienne watched, a flight of pigeons launched themselves from this spire ; it seemed to quiver. The Loire, from this height, was as clear as it was lazy.

He walked back to the courtyard, to the door at the top of a semicircular flight of steps. The doorkeeper smiled at him and said,

“ Go along upstairs, sir. He always wants to see you.”

He was walking along the corridor towards Émile's own rooms : a door opened on a narrow staircase, and a woman coming out said gaily,

“ Ah, Bonamy. I was thinking of you. Please talk to me for a minute. Émile is writing a letter for me.”

Reluctantly, he followed her into the room. She had been writing at a desk ; she now threw the letter into a drawer full of other papers that must be hers. The Comtesse de Freppel had been Bergeot's mistress for nearly four years ; she was not discreet, but she had not outraged opinion more than a little : sober and stiff-minded persons, with a touch of the hypocrisy inherited from Protestant ancestors turned Catholic in 1685 to avoid being expelled, could pretend to know nothing about it, while making good and sly use of her influence. Even the general secretary of the Prefecture, an urbane elderly man, with an ingrown vanity which gave him more trouble than his weak liver, had admired her since the day she discovered that he was the author of an anonymous book of poems and took the trouble to get them by heart and quote them to him in her seductive voice.

Mme de Freppel was forty : she was small, dark, with dark eyes, which were short-sighted, so that she looked at you closely : you saw that they were made of a substance which absorbed light without giving any of it back ; it was like staring at pitch. She was delicately made, not a line wasted, with beautiful hands and feet. Her voice was charming.

"How are you, Marguerite ? And how is Émile ?" Rienne asked. He spoke stiffly, because of his dislike of using her Christian name — she insisted on it. "He looked tired when I saw him yesterday."

"He is tired. He's worn out. But you know what Émile is, he works with his nerves as well as with mind and body."

"He always did," Rienne said, with the pride of a father. "After examinations I had almost to carry him home. But he was always successful."

"How fond you are of him," Mme de Freppel said, smiling.

"Why not ?"

She invited him to sit down, but he remained standing, his long thin body quite rigid, head bent forward. He did not intend to stay a second longer than necessary. A little malice came into her eyes, but she looked away and began to talk about Émile, his courage, the energy with which he made his hand felt in every village of the department.

"The peasants know him as well as they know their mayor ; they write asking him to settle quarrels, they tell him what Jules and Jean write from the regiment. Yesterday an old woman came with a single egg and a marigold for him. He answers every letter, he sees everybody ; you'd think he had nothing to do but reconcile two bad-tempered old men who have been quarrelling over a square yard of mud. I see them leaving sometimes ; he walks across the courtyard with a hand on each of their shoulders. . . . ' Goodbye, sir, goodbye,' they call out, smiling at him like schoolgirls, waving their hands : ' we shan't forget you ' . . . and off they go, the old fools, and Émile rushes back to his room to finish the work they interrupted. When I scold him — ' Why do you let them ? ' — he says, ' Oh, they're all children.' And he works until midnight and can't sleep."

Charmed in spite of himself, Rienne sat down. After all, if she could appreciate how good Émile was, she must be

good herself. He noticed that she had tears in her eyes. She got rid of them, and listened smiling as he told her in his precise voice that Émile was stubbornly ambitious and a bad judge of people. I know both these things better than you do, Mme de Freppel thought. She kept her eyes fixed gently on Rienne, half admiring him for his simplicity, aware that at the back of his cool glance his mind was acute and balanced. She was not at her ease with him ; he made her feel ignorant. And this morning she had fastened the torn strap of her chemise with a safety-pin ; she imagined he knew it.

She interrupted him quickly.

" Do you know I have people coming to dinner tonight ? Will you come ? Please do. Dinner is at half-past eight. Émile has promised me to be in time."

Not wishing to hurt her — since she appreciated Émile — Rienne said he would come.

Chapter 2

As soon as he saw Rienne, Bergeot closed the file he had opened, and stood up. " Let's go outside. I've been in this room since eight this morning."

He walked in front of Rienne along passages and down a staircase leading to the south terrace. Not above middle height, he held himself well and walked with a nervous quickness ; all his movements were abrupt and lively. Looking at him in the light, Rienne saw that he was grey with fatigue. But he was smiling.

" I've had a grand day," he said. " You know the trouble we've had with the farmers the whole of this spring. Well, I've settled it ! I had the worst and wealthiest offenders in my room and I talked, my God, Bonamy, how I talked ! I demolished all their arguments and made them angry, then made them laugh, then talked to them about the war, and all but one of them came round. At one o'clock I took them down to lunch and brought out bottles of Rablay and Quarts de Chaumes. The last sinner repented. It's all over, I've

won. . . . And another blessing — even more merciful. Our Grosdidier has at last taken his liver to Vichy, the first time for three years. I'm absolute. I enjoy all my divine right."

Rienne smiled. When they were children, Émile had practised his diplomacy not only on older people who rewarded him with francs, but on his schoolfellows, so that whatever he did was right. But there was always one boy, usually his senior and hard-working, who refused to be charmed and cost Émile more in irritation than the respect of the others flattered him. This austere rôle of irritant was filled by his deputy, the general secretary of the Prefecture : at least a quarter of Émile's energy and ingenuity was spent on outflanking him. It was probably the strain on M. Grosdidier himself which had ruined his liver.

"You ought to rest now and then."

"Nonsense," Bergeot said, "I flourish on overwork."

"On your successes, you mean." In those days, he thought, Émile was conceited, but no one, not even Louis Mathieu, told him so. Is he still conceited ? Of course — and why not ?

"You know me too well," Bergeot said, smiling. "If ever I begin to rob the till, you're the person I shall be afraid of. . . ."

From this south side of the Prefecture they could see, across the roofs of the town, the narrow valley of a river hurrying to join the Loire ; the country on this side was smudged with blue patches of forest : three miles away, on its hill above the river, the village of Thouédun, only its château visible. They had no need to see them to know that at this moment three elderly fishermen were trying for the thousandth time to catch a pike in the mill-pool, always the same pike. And they could see the reeds and water-lilies in the pool move gently ; it was a meadow for pike. Thouédun was their village, they had been born in it, in the same room, almost in the same moment.

They heard Mme de Freppel's voice. After a moment a man appeared at the end of the terrace and came towards them, smiling shyly.

He was M. de Thiviers, Émile's friend and patron. Thiviers was probably the wealthiest man in a town which, small as it was, unimportant — having neither Court of Appeal nor university — concealed a number of very rich

men : he was a banker : his aeroplane works, on the southern edge of Seuilly, had been extended to meet war needs. He was a scholar, author of a highly-esteemed *Life of St. Augustine*. He had an incurable and appealing modesty. Fervently religious, a Protestant, descended from a family of Huguenot landowners, his intimate friends were among believing Roman Catholics. He shared their anxieties about an irreligious and tainted Republic. When the Abbey Church of St. Peter needed a hundred thousand francs for repairs he came one evening to see the Bishop's secretary with a cheque for the whole sum, and offered it with the guilty air of a child trying to please his nurse. But for the indiscretion of a clerk, the gift would have remained anonymous.

He had married, very young, his second cousin. She was not good-looking, and a few weeks after the marriage she was hurt in a car accident, and disfigured. She became an invalid as well as ugly. Thiviers did not allow her to think of herself as useless. He asked her advice before he made any decision of importance. When he came into her room — probably she was lying down, a handkerchief soaked in Florida water tied round her head, because of her headaches — he talked to himself aloud. If one of his business rivals had hidden himself at the other side of the couch, he might have heard, "And so, my dear Nini, you agree to selling the West Africans. Very well, but it will frighten them in Paris." All this time Nini lay with half-closed eyes. She never answered. She listened. Her husband kissed her hand and tiptoed out of the room. She would see him again at eleven o'clock at night, when he came into her bedroom and knelt at her bed to say his prayers. Unless she were too ill, she knelt with him. Her heavy angular body, covered in delaine and brownish-grey wool, leaned forward by the side of her husband's in tailored silk. Thiviers carried his natural elegance into his piety. She had smelled the same fresh scent of fern from his hair and body every night for thirty-five years. The table in his dressing-room held a row of gold-topped bottles of lotions, mouth-wash, hair-oil, put up for him by Lhoty. He rode every morning, and every evening exercised faithfully in his room. One of his wife's rare carnal pleasures was to keep up to the mark his cupboards-ful of linen shirts, pyjamas, handkerchiefs, embroidered with the small monogram.

This dandy, this faithful husband, this Christian financier, had the diffidence of a well-meaning child.

"Marguerite sent me round," he said gently to Bergeot. "I had no idea you were not alone. I only need to speak to you for a minute."

Rienne walked to the other end of the terrace. From there, without overhearing what was said, he could watch them. The banker was head and shoulders taller than Bergeot; he stooped a little. His long mild back, picked out like a tombstone by the setting sun, offered its witness to the charities of the man lying under it. Bergeot looked up into his face, listening avidly: when he answered, he gesticulated, smiled, putting out every sparrow trick of charm he possessed. He was replying to some criticism. Words gushed out of him, he put both hands on Thiviers's arms and gripped them affectionately. He was getting his way; an air of confidence and gaiety rose from him. . . . He had reason, as Rienne knew, to be grateful to the banker. When they met, three, or was it four years after the end of the last war, M. de Thiviers's influence took the place in the younger man's career of a family and money. He placed Émile with his personal friend, the Prefect of Seuilly, and when Émile became sub-Prefect in the Seine-et-Oise Department, placed him again as P.P.S. to a Minister, another friend. The Prefect of Seuilly died suddenly and the Minister was able to appoint Émile. . . . Rienne was convinced that, without Thiviers, Émile's honesty would have ruined him at a time when politics has to shark a living between lawyers and financiers.

M. de Thiviers had never been involved in a scandal, personal or political.

He went away. Bergeot was smiling and satisfied. He rushed back to Rienne and began to talk about the financier with a half-pitying admiration.

"Heaven knows what he goes through, with his wife. . . . And he's liberal-minded, you know, in spite of his wealth. He supports me at every turn."

"You flatter him," Rienne said drily.

"Not at all," Bergeot said. He smiled. "Perhaps I do — a little. He has his vanities. But they all have — the poorest peasants. Surely you'd rather I led them gently by the nose along the right road, instead of kicking them behind? In any case, kicks would be useless. . . . Thiviers supports

me because he approves of my plans. From a man like him, that's something. Bonamy, in ten years, war or no war, we shall have the finest schools, the best roads, the most satisfied farmers in France. Isn't it worth a little trouble in handling people? Or perhaps you think I flatter because I'm weak?"

Rienne looked at him, at his firm delicate mouth and lined forehead. The lines were deeper than a week ago. He was wearing himself out; he had only too much courage, too eager a will.

"No," he said.

The undergrown schoolboy Émile had imposed himself on his class by friendliness and wit. His vanity in those days was to pretend to be idling. In fact, he studied until late at night; he had the knack of being able, in an examination, to recall everything he had read once touching the question. The same knack provided him on the instant with a comment that would please the person, schoolfellow or master, he was talking to. Rienne had seen the trick played a hundred times: since it was never played on him, he forgave it. It touched him, and he loved Émile for it.

"You must be the best-liked man in Seully," he said, smiling.

"That's nothing," Émile retorted. "What I should like is to be Premier."

Was he joking? Rienne thought so. But — thirty years ago — they were shivering together in their unwarmed attic, he had smiled in the same way when the other boy said, "One of these days I'm going to live in the finest house in Seully. You'll see."

Rienne stood up. His arm in Bergeot's, he looked across the valley towards their unseen village. The rays of the sun, level now with the tops of the trees, gave them, and the roof and towers of the château, an exquisite clarity. Points of light sprang from the roof. He imagined the narrow village street, between its old houses, and the slow coming of night there with a step as silent as an old woman in her list slippers. Without any regret, he looked forward to the day when he would be retired, to live out the rest of his life there, in that deep obscurity of a province.

"To think," Émile said abruptly, "that we started there. In that nothing. If I had to go back I'd drown myself."

He laughed, but there was an undertone of fury in his voice. Rienne looked at him with affection and amusement.

"Why should you go back?"

"I never will," Bergeot said. "Whatever happens to me in the future will be extraordinary. I know it, I've always known it." He smiled, with a trace of embarrassment. "I can say that to you. To no one else."

Chapter 3

MME DE FREPPEL'S house, a moderately large manor-house of the sixteenth century, was on the bank of the Loire a little east of Seuilly, less than two miles from the Prefecture. A long low house, with an octagonal tower enclosing the staircase. The carriage-road swept round a rough lawn to the door at the foot of the tower. At the other side of the house, the gardens, just as rough, sloped down to the river, spread out here in all its magnificence, like a wide lake, rather shallow.

Rienne told his driver to go back to Seuilly; he would walk home afterwards. He stood for a moment enjoying the freshened air: the sun was almost gone and a new clearness was waiting to seize everything for a few minutes, until it too was dispossessed slowly. Impossible, in spite of anxieties, of his distrust of Mme de Freppel, not to feel grateful for the fineness of the Angevin air, finer, easier, he felt sure, than any other in the world. He turned with regret to go into the house.

At dinner he was placed at the end of the table, next an unimportant guest. This was Lucien Sugny, Bergeot's principal private secretary, a young man he had picked up himself, from the Law School. He had been able to keep him out of the army — against his will — because he was short-sighted; without his glasses he could not see across the table. His exemption worried him, and he seized his chance to talk about it to Rienne. Couldn't Colonel Rienne arrange for a peremptory order to come from the barracks: a despatch-rider was urgently needed, he must be able to see better at night than in the day-time; the general himself had thought of Lucien Sugny. . . .

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"And you see, then," Lucien said, "I could get away without hurting his feelings. . . ."

"Whose feelings?"

"The Prefect's, of course," Lucien said reproachfully. "You know, he told me he couldn't do without me, he asked me if I really wanted to leave him with a private secretary who wouldn't know where anything was and would let in the wrong people; he made me feel a brute for even asking to go: I promised to stay with him for the rest of his life. You know, there's nobody like him, he's so honest, so clever that no one ever gets the better of him; he thinks of everything, he remembers everyone in every school he visits — and he looks in oftener than the Inspector. I believe he knows five hundred brats by their names. He's marvellous."

How ridiculous he is, Rienne thought. And how likeable. He noticed that Lucien's dinner-jacket was too small for him; his wrists, wide and strongly boned, stuck far out of the sleeves. He had grown since it was made, or perhaps it was not his, it was a cast-off. Lucien knew he was being examined. He blushed.

"You're wondering about my jacket," he said. "Do you know I have to sit holding my stomach in, for fear the button gives? It was my brother's when he went to Paris — and since it was perfectly good, and my mother thought I should need one . . . I've grown since I came to Seuilly. We ate much less at home."

If you dined here regularly, Rienne thought, you would shrink. Mme de Freppel's dinners were notorious. There was never enough food, and what there was, of the poorest sort. She could not bring herself to spend money on guests. Yet no one refused an invitation. If you offend her, they said, you offend the Prefect.

"I'm sorry I can't help you," he said. "You'll have to keep your promise."

"If it had been any but war-time, I should be happy working for him for nothing," Lucien said miserably.

"Quite unnecessary," Rienne said.

Mme de Freppel raised her voice a little, on a delicious cry of surprise and alarm. Lucien's face changed, he smiled ecstatically.

"She's beautiful, don't you think?"

Rienne did not answer. He was watching M. de Thiviers as he talked earnestly to Mme de Freppel. Thiviers held

himself stiffly — what was the matter with his buttons ? — and bent his head to bring his mouth on a level with her ear. His long face wore its usual expression of patience, almost of martyrdom : a polite martyr, his hair, brown and thick, was brushed back in three waves. The distance between his nose, firmly arched, and his long firm upper lip, gave his face a naked air ; for all its patience it was arrogant.

Lucien said,

“ I bet I know what M. de Thiviers is telling Mme de Freppel. The country is ruined, morally and financially. He confuses the two things. He sells his moral issues short and lays up five per cent Exchequer Bonds in heaven.”

“ I see you know all about him,” Rienne said drily.

The young man was not abashed. Whenever he could free himself from the self-contempt dragging him back on one side and the insane confidence hoisting him on the other, he had a minute or two of certainty, the shrewdness and intelligence of his mature self seizing him. Later in the evening he would blush, remembering that Rienne had snubbed him, and wish, with despair, that he had held his tongue.

Rienne's other neighbour was a priest, the secretary of the aged Bishop of Seuilly. Mme de Freppel has a precise idea of my importance, he thought, smiling : among the secretaries. A prolonged a-a-ah, issuing from deep in the throat, warned him that Abbé Garnier was going to speak to him. He prepared, with the modest indifference he felt for this priest, to listen. Abbé Garnier was a scholar, the author of half a dozen books on doctrine ; they had made him suspect in official Government circles by reason of the tone he adopted each time he referred — in thickly scattered footnotes — to the civil authority. When he realised this — and realised at the same time that his attitude did not commend itself to his superiors in the Church — he was in despair, and tried to remedy his fault by another and bolder excursion into politics. This had the effect of offending everyone. So far he was blissfully unaware of this, and confident in his learning and integrity.

He was a small man, almost squat, the son of a cattle farmer of the Morvan, from whom he had inherited, with small piercing eyes, his nose for a bargain ; his room was stacked with rare first editions and handsomely-bound books he had found in country shops and saved, carrying them home

in his arms like a good shepherd, to be dusted and cherished.

"My dear Colonel." Its resonance, always at the same pitch, made his voice stupefying. "I'm a-ah delighted to see that you are still able to attend a social function. I take it that the war is not absorbing all your energy yet. Is this a good sign?"

"If you like to believe it," Rienne said.

"Who am I to have opinions on military strategy?" Garnier trumpeted, smiling. It was embarrassing to talk to him because his voice reached so far. "I rely on you to instruct me."

"Quite useless," Rienne said. "I'm not a strategist."

"Well, well. Nor am I. I'm only a modest observer of contemporary history." He lowered his voice a little. "Do you know what is the real vice of our time, the worm that may destroy us? The passion for security, my dear sir. It has turned us into a nation of place-hunters. Young men, instead of risking themselves to achieve something of their own — if only to turn their father's shop into a better — scramble for a seat in government service. I could name a dozen instances among families I know. It shocks me."

Rienne listened absently. Through the window facing him he could see, foreshortened, a stretch of the Loire. An island of reeds and stunted willows was anchored in mid-stream; he remembered that when he was ten he had pretended during a whole summer to be living on just such an island — alone: he was careful when he went out not to walk over the edge, when anyone spoke to him he raised his voice to carry as far as the bank, his only food was berries; but he was content: his enemies, the traitors who had chased him from his palace, were baffled. . . . The shadows of bats flew past the window, without a sound.

After dinner, in the long drawing-room, where the curtains had been drawn and as few lamps lit as possible, he stood trying to become invisible, in the bay of a window. At a short distance, the general commanding the region, General Piriac, and his chief of staff, Woerth, had their backs to him. They were talking to Rienne's immediate superior — General Ligny. From the set of Woerth's shoulders, Rienne saw that he was being baited by Ligny. All at once Ligny caught sight of his A.D.C. and beckoned him over. Rienne sighed as he obeyed; he had intended to slip away.

"Rienne, my dear boy," Ligny said, "did you read

the *Seuilly Journal* this afternoon ? ”

“ No, sir, I didn’t.”

“ The editor should be in jail,” General Woerth said coolly.

Rienne glanced at him. Who could believe that Woerth was sixty-four ? He was proud of his slender waist, his straight back and of a vitality that wore out officers thirty years younger. His face was thin and lined ; the lines themselves seemed the marks made by an impatient energy. His foot tapped, as it did when he was controlling his anger.

“ But he has every excuse,” Ligny said, smiling. He looked at Rienne. “ You know him, don’t you ? ”

“ The editor ? ” Rienne said. “ Louis Mathieu ? Yes. We were at school together in Seuilly. I have a great respect for him.”

“ And he’s a Jew ? ”

“ Yes, he is a Jew.”

“ You see ? ” Ligny said, with an air of modest triumph. “ Who has a better right to hate the Germans, and insist that they should be wiped out this time ? Personally, I found his article a little violent, but I admit its justice.”

“ Whatever his race — and though I dislike Jews I am not an anti-Semite,” Woerth said, with cool distaste, “ I don’t admit the right of a civilian to make any comment on the conduct of the war. Of any war.”

“ Ah,” Ligny said mischievously, “ you’re all alike, you people who were brought up by a certain chief of staff — no, no, don’t worry, I’m not going to insult his memory — poor old Gigi. He taught all his officers the same dogma. According to him, war is an affair of the general staffs — with, of course, the essential collaboration of a proper number of troops. In fact, a mystery — and only initiates have a right to amuse themselves.”

“ The conduct of a war belongs precisely to the general staffs,” Woerth said. “ Any interference by civilians — journalists, clerks, women, street-sweepers — is certain to vulgarise it. They don’t understand anything, they allow their passions to carry them away, they want miracles, they get hold of romantic notions about new weapons — tanks, aeroplanes, they imagine these will work the miracle. I’d like to forbid discussion during a war. It wastes time and creates a bad atmosphere. People should be told what to do, and do it.”

"What do you think, sir?" Ligny asked, turning to Piriac.

Piriac had been listening to the argument with a faintly bewildered air. His square body, buttoned stiffly into his uniform, had the air of an enormous puppet; his gestures were slow, and when he moved an arm it rose as though a spring had been released; he had a big head, reassuring and severe: the heavy jaw, the pouches under the eyes, gave an impression of serenity rather than age. But he was old; he was seventy, a soldier with a distinguished record, distinguished more for never having made a mistake than for any obvious successes. . . . He had a reputation for fatherly kindness, and a prodigious memory which never forgot the name or face of a soldier he had spoken to once.

He lifted his head and gazed at Ligny. Something in the younger man's face — Ligny was a bare sixty-two — gave him the idea that Ligny was joking. He allowed himself to relax.

"Young man," he said pleasantly, "you know what I think about tanks and all these other toys for children. What chance will anything have, human or mechanical, if it comes within range of the Maginot guns? In this war we shall hardly lose a man for every hundred Germans who will batter themselves to death. And quite right. France can't afford to lose blood."

"But do you think civilians should give advice about the war, sir?" Ligny asked.

"Certainly not," Piriac said simply.

Ligny's eyes sparkled.

"What did I say?" he murmured to Woerth. "You both come from the same staff."

"That has nothing to do with it," Woerth said. "As a matter of principle, I say that only a very few persons in the country have a right to give advice. Too many of our so-called leaders are spiritually rotted — irreligious, greedy, corrupt. There are moments when I look at some gentle awkward soldier and wonder whether it's worth cutting short his life to prolong the life of a diseased society."

"When you become mystical," Ligny said, smiling, "I can't follow you."

"In your own late general staff you weren't, I think, given much training in rapid movement?" Woerth said.

Ligny looked at him with delight. He almost applauded. Turning to Rienne, he said,

"You see? It's always the same thing. Whenever we dine in this house, we argue. It's the atrocious food. I'm suffering agonies at this moment."

"You might, sir, try eating before you come," Rienne said in a low voice.

Ligny, though a very rich man, lived as simply as did the other two generals — more simply. Except for a cup of coffee and a roll when he woke, he ate nothing until seven o'clock in the evening. Then he dined lightly and carefully, usually at the Hôtel Buran.

Piriac's mind was still turning slowly and heavily round a thought of its own. He gripped Woerth's shoulder; his hand closing round it as though it were the knob of a stick.

"It will be a long war."

"The difference between a long war ending theoretically in a victory, and a short war ending in a theoretical compromise, is only that the first will be fatal," Woerth said calmly.

"And the difference between compromise and victory?" Ligny asked.

"Nil — in the circumstances."

Ligny shrugged his shoulders. He took out a shabby notebook, opened it and handed Rienne a small photograph.

"My latest find," he said gaily.

"Who is he, sir, he's not handsome?" Rienne asked. He was looking at the smudged picture of a schoolboy with a thin staring face and anxious mouth.

"Goebbels, aged twelve."

Ligny had a collection of photographs of the Nazi leaders at all ages. "You understand," he would say, displaying it, "it's natural history — I've always had a taste for it." He intended, as soon as the collection was respectably large, to arrange it in a room of the Ligny house in Bourges, and present the house — on condition that his gallery was carefully kept — to the nation: it was a magnificent piece of sixteenth-century domestic architecture and he was the last of his family.

Rienne handed back the photograph. Before Ligny could take it, Piriac's great paw lifted it out of the aide-de-camp's hand: he studied it for a minute with an indulgent smile,

the same smile he gave to tanks and boys whipping their tops, then handed it over.

"Ridiculous," he said kindly. "But all the same, what a mug."

"Here he comes — at last," Woerth said coldly. He had turned his shoulder on Ligny and his natural history, and was facing the door.

The others looked round. Bergeot was just coming into the room: he had not turned up at a quarter to nine when they went in to dinner, and his seat beside Piriac had remained empty. He had not changed his clothes. Mme de Freppel rushed over to him. In the silence his coming in made, her voice, sharpened by displeasure, carried across the large room. She was scolding him for being late. His answers were inaudible, but his hands moved in the gesture of a child defending himself.

"If he were a guest she could feel he'd behaved badly." Woerth said, with contempt. "But since he's morally and immorally the head of the house, she might spare us the intimacies."

"He's quite a good fellow," Ligny said. "Intelligent — and he has the energy of the devil."

"I'm not denying his talents," Woerth said. "But I disapprove of them. He has the General Council in his pocket — or enough of it. If it has a protest to make, he hears of it beforehand and sees to it that it doesn't come to anything." He looked at Piriac. "It seems to me a pity not to curb him — when we could."

Piriac said nothing. Either he missed the disapproval of his laxness — if it were laxness and not simply Bergeot's flattery which made him leave, in practice, almost all the Prefect's peace-time powers still in his hands. Or, which was more likely, it gave him a malicious pleasure to annoy Woerth, even when it involved favouring a civilian. . . . He had only learned in the last week that Mme de Freppel was Bergeot's mistress. He had not accustomed his mind to it yet. He had strict ideas, and he disliked irregularity. Marrying at thirty, he had been a faithful husband during the twenty-nine years his wife lived to enjoy her ailments. But, just as he was never surprised when he heard that a Protestant or an atheist had stolen public funds, so, without realising it, he had a lower standard for civilians than for soldiers: the Prefect's morals seemed to him infinitely less vicious than a

careless groom. If he had had only to do with horses during his career, Piriac would have merited his name as a humane general.

As soon as he could, while Bergeot was apologising to General Piriac, Rienne slipped away. He looked for his hostess. She was nowhere to be seen now. But when he was passing a screen drawn across a window he heard her voice, followed by a familiar muffled boom.

"... my dear Countess, my nephew is a—ah young man of the highest ability. I assure you. If you can prevail on the Prefect to find a place for him, you will be doing a service to the Department — I say nothing of the service to me and the young man's parents. After all, why should all the future intelligence of the country be sacrificed in this war?"

Rienne decided not to interrupt.

Chapter 4

THE road from Mme de Freppel's house into Seuilly followed the Loire the whole way, between the countryside asleep and the silent river — silent except that now and then a movement begun undersea ended its life here with a scarcely perceptible sigh among the reeds growing at the edge. He could only hear this sound if he stood quiet to listen. A shrew-mouse, disturbed by his footsteps, ran across the road and vanished, a shadow, in the grass. It was at last almost cool.

As he came into Seuilly he walked along the Quai Gambetta, between pollarded trees of the same height like ninepins, and the screen of pallid houses of all sizes, their doorways scribbling an illegible sentence along the lower edge; almost every window was shut to keep out the mist that for a bare hour at sunrise would cover the Loire. Behind and above them, on its cliff, the Prefecture cut the sky with its long roof and one delicate tower. Rienne passed the end of the bridge over the Loire; instead of taking the shortest road to the barracks, he kept along the embankment, here the Quai d'Angers. Just beyond the

She started at the brutal harshness of his voice, and looked at Rienne, who nodded. She went away. Mathieu looked round the small room with its few tables and the counter in one corner. It was clean, the floor had just been scrubbed; but for the first time Rienne saw it as a bare place, without any of those pitiful or feminine touches he had imagined on his other visits. When Marie came back he asked her whether she had heard from Pierre. She put down the tray with the bowls of soup and drew a letter out of her pocket. She did not offer it to him to read, but held it while she said,

"He is well, he wants to come home for a day, it's eight and a half months since he went, and all this time he has done nothing except mix concrete. Pierre. He says the Germans fire for a quarter of an hour in the evening, and ours fire back, and that's all, they hear the Germans singing their songs. The Germans put up notices — *Go home to your wives, we don't want to fight you.* Pierre says if only he could."

She hesitated. The colour that had come into her cheeks ran over her face and throat. She turned to go away.

"So long as he's well," Rienne said.

The young woman turned back. She was weeping like a child, uncontrollably, without lifting her hands to her face.

"It's not that," she said. "He should be at home. When will this war end? Do you know?"

"Not better than you do," Rienne said gently. "It's for the safety of France. And to make this home of yours safe."

"How did it become unsafe?" Marie asked. She stopped abruptly. "I must get on with the work. Excuse me, please."

She disappeared into the room at the back, the only other room beside the kitchen. Rienne supposed it was the bedroom; it would be almost filled by a double bed, and there would be a chest and a large cupboard holding all they possessed, apart from themselves, of pride and pleasure. He glanced at Mathieu, who was frowning.

"What's the matter, Louis?"

"Do you suppose women cried as much in 1914?" Mathieu said coldly, "I'm quite sure they didn't. They held their heads up, and when they had to wear black they bought it with dry eyes. Something is wrong with a country at war when women cry to have their husbands sent back."

"But it's natural," Rienne said.

"One doesn't ask women to be natural in a war: They're asked to be unselfish and quiet." He lifted his slender hand and brought it down like a knife, edgewise. "They might remember they're unimportant: France is made up of myriads of dead French men and women and a handful, a few million, of living. If some of these join the rest it can't matter much."

"They think it does," Rienne said, with a smile

He reflected that Mathieu had as few possessions as a professional soldier. But had he no memories? Since it is by their memories that men cling to life, clinging to the curtain of glass beads hung across a doorway in their first home, to the ray of light reflected in a cupboard, to the smell of a leaf or of their toothpaste, to a word, to a ship's whistle. Mathieu had eyes of the kind we call piercing: what prevented him from seeing with them the appeal as well as the weakness of Pierre's Marie, with her childish arms and the memories of a wife? At some moment in his life he must have turned against himself and his own humanity. He had hated himself — but why?

"At least a dozen people living in this town," Mathieu said, "ought to be shot at once, before they turn the rest into cowards."

Rienne shook his head. "They couldn't do it by themselves, my dear Louis. You forget they have helping them a million and a half others, the dead of the last war."

"If I know them — and I did know them," Mathieu said harshly, "the young men I lived with for four years — some of them were not young, and towards the end some were almost children — they're the last to say: It's impossible, we can't do it."

"I heard some of them say it, all the same. That was in '17, after the slaughter on the Chemin des Dames. Thousands of them must have died thinking it."

"Well, they were mistaken," Mathieu said. "We did do it." He made the same gesture with his hand. "What alarms me is this appalling vacuum along our frontier. Half a million men doing nothing, bored to death. Waiting. For what? For a German clock to strike. . . . You hear the sort of letter they write to their wives. . . . It's not only the soldiers, but at home here things are going as badly. Do you know what I discovered yesterday? That Thiviers's immense works is turning out five aeroplanes a

month. Five ! Think of it ! It's madness."

Rienne did not answer. He did not think the other man's anxiety absurd, but he thought it exaggerated, he thought that when the hour struck, and whether it struck in German or not made no difference, everything weak and greedy would vanish. Pierre, a million Pierres, would know what to do, and the Maries go about, as before, dry-eyed. As before. . . . Between a France at peace and at war is only the difference between two sets of habits, equally familiar ; the husband's hand caressing his wife takes as suddenly to a rifle. Why not ? Like the habit of pleasure, the war habit very soon loses its strangeness. A matter of a few weeks. . . .

The room was airless. Rienne noticed that the walls had been painted by an amateur, who did not know how to keep the colours even. Pierre, probably. He heard the young woman move in the next room. We must go, he thought : she'll want to sleep for a few hours, with Pierre's letter.

Mathieu began speaking again, in a curious voice. You might have thought he was ashamed, if he had ever been known to feel shame. But he was not sensitive.

"You know about the internment camp at Geulin ?"

"I'm told it's very uncomfortable," Rienne said.

"Uncomfortable is scarcely the word," Mathieu said drily. "It's a cess-pit. Don't mistake me, I know it's useless to protest. The German refugees have outlasted their welcome and we have other things to do now than protect them from ourselves."

He stopped. Rienne waited.

"I . . . have a friend there."

Rienne looked at him kindly. It is the first time, he thought, I have ever heard Louis speak of someone as his friend. It would be an interned German ! He noticed with some surprise the effort Mathieu was making to control his voice.

"He's not a Jew, he's an ex-officer in the Imperial army called Uhland, Joachim von Uhland. I knew him in Berlin, after the war. He had had a curious career : he was one of the men who put down the socialist revolution, mercilessly, I believe. Later on he became a socialist himself, left the army ; when I knew him he was very poor. He looked like a Prussian officer. He always will. After 1933 he spent three years in Dachau ; he was released and came here. I saw him in Paris. Only last week I heard he was in the camp at

Geulin." He paused. "It's not six miles from this room."

"Well," Rienne said gently, "what do you want me to do? You didn't tell me all this for nothing."

"Have I ever asked you to help me?"

"Never."

"I'm asking now. . . . The only man here who could help Uhland is Émile Bergeot. A few interned men have been released by local authorities. It can be done. It has been done. But I don't want to speak to Émile myself. Since we were at school I've never asked him for anything. . . ."

"You want me to ask?" Rienne said.

"If you will."

Rienne still hesitated. Why ask Émile to choose one out of all the wretched creatures shut up in the "cess-pit," and save him? It was scarcely just. Just? But you cannot save everyone. Out of this vast injustice which is human life, why not try to save one?

"Are you quite sure of this Prussian ex-officer?" he asked Mathieu.

"As sure as I am of myself," Mathieu said in a low voice.

"Very well," Rienne said, with his slight smile, "I'll speak to Émile about him."

"Thanks."

Rienne got up. He laid five francs on the counter and knocked on the door of Marie's room. "Good-night, Marie, we're going." She answered him in a voice that sounded as though she were crying again, and did not come out. They heard her running to put the chain across the door when they were outside.

It was well past midnight. Everything was quiet, not a sound, not an aeroplane. At the other side of the country, Rienne thought, somewhere near the Vosges, a patrol was creeping up to a German outpost, the only men at war in France this night. The others were waiting — to be sent here or there, to move against the enemy, to retreat. Ignorant, patient, docile, men whose hands remembered some woman, who knew how to prune vines, balance a ledger, bake bread for a village, they waited, with all they had learned to do for their fellows held in suspense in them, as the country itself was suspended between night and day, dying and living. It was inhuman and necessary; it was a war. He turned to say goodbye to Mathieu: and saw that

he had gone. He listened for footsteps, but the other must have been gone some minutes, there was not a sound. And now he remembered hearing Mathieu say good-night, but he could not remember that he had answered.

Chapter .5

ÉMILE BERGEOT woke early. He got up, opened the shutters, leaning out as far as he could into the freshness. It would be another cloudless day. The long shadow of the Prefecture across the garden was the only stain he could see on its surface, already cleansed and varnished by the light. The colour of the trees was dazzling : a bird, followed by another, and another, flew up like a jet of smoke from a bush close to the window.

He looked at his watch — a handsome gold watch given him by Thiviers. Scarcely five o'clock. Pulling on trousers and shirt, he went out and strolled down the carriage road towards the town. The tomb-like houses below the Prefecture were open, people had begun living. A child crawled to the door of a house and looked up at him with enormous dark eyes.

"What are you doing?" Bergeot asked him.

The child smiled. A young woman snatched him up. She was bare-armed, with big firm arms and a strong throat. In the strong light the fine down covering her arms and nape turned suddenly golden. The centuries-old walls of France can still ripen a superb fruit. The voice of another child, and the voice of an old woman, murmured on in the dark room, a cavern, behind the window. The young woman noticed Bergeot's glance at her arms and throat, blushed, and disappeared into the house.

He walked on and down, and came out at last on to the Quai Gambetta. After the darkness of narrow streets, the sunlight slapped at him like a sail. He steadied himself between the white fronts of houses and the Loire, still, below its sleek surface, wrinkled by the night. Every plane tree and lime along the edge of the quay gave out its purest light

of the day. He heard a church clock strike the quarter, and then another: a full minute later, the town hall clock decided to confirm the rumour. It did so suddenly, like an alarm-clock. A shutter was flung open in the nearest house and a housewife shook out her bedding at the head of a column of women rubbing their eyes and fastening the gaping plackets of skirts.

Except for a few workmen — old men, boys too young to be called up yet — Bergeot was the only person breathing an air as clear and living as a young Loire salmon. He felt a familiar joy and confidence. If only he could embrace the town, with its old houses, churches, barracks, its bridges across the Loire, its sun. He felt under his hand on the wall of the embankment the veins starting off to join it to all the other towns and villages of France and to the living wall of men on the frontier, placing between themselves and an invader their memories of just such days as this, just such houses as that one with its shabby iron balconies and narrow door, just such a light, firm, bounding, as was falling on all the rivers of the only flawlessly human country in the world.

He heard a man's voice behind him, slow, tender, broken up by chuckling intervals. Turning round, he saw that a very old man had seated himself on a bench under the trees. He had with him a small mongrel, to whom he was reading aloud from yesterday's *Journal*. He read monotonously, carefully, like a child, stumbling over many of the words. Now and then he impressed a point on his dog by turning to him with an admonishing glance. . . . "Listen to this, old chap. . . ." The dog lay on the seat with his head held aside. He was bored. The old man glanced up when Bergeot's shadow fell across the newspaper.

"What do you think, sir?" he said, in his almost extinguished voice, "can there be more than a dozen human beings, among all the millions trapped in it, who actually want to be at war — on a day like this?"

"I daresay a dozen," Bergeot said.

"Yes. Then who are the lunatics? All the other millions who are getting up this morning — in this sunlight — to kill each other." He had not lifted his finger from the line he was reading, and now went on patiently, with an imploring smile at his dog. "Do just listen, old fellow. . . ."

Towards the middle of the morning, when Bergeot was

busy with his correspondence, M. de Thiviers was announced.

"Send him in," Bergeot said.

He looked over his desk swiftly. Was there anything he was ashamed of? Nothing — but he thrust out of sight a letter from his sister, a widow living rather poorly at Troyes. There was always this moment, before Thiviers came into his room, when he felt in himself like a scald all the awkwardness of the boy who ran about barefoot in summer to save money.

Thiviers came in smiling and elegant, carrying himself with the assurance of a good-looking woman. In his narrow shoulders and well-filled-out body there was in fact something womanly; he had a trick of pursing his lips. Or it was perhaps a priest he reminded you of; there are priests who have the faces of matriarchs, filed down by suavity and a civilised gentle innocence.

He seated himself and looked at the Prefect with the affection Bergeot found flattering and embarrassing. He was embarrassed because — for all his gratitude — he did not return it. He loved two people, Rienne, Marguerite, held to each of them by a different nerve, and for each of them he was a different being. For his other friends, admirers, enemies, he was a wholly or partly fictitious character. When he was able to press heart or mind into this put-on character, he was a success, he won the approval he craved; he felt safe. His enemies were the people he had not managed to convince.

Thiviers had come to complain about the *Journal* and its editor. Mathieu had published an attack on him, so injurious that even a convinced liberal, a man to whom the suppression of newspapers was a lay blasphemy, could not rest under it.

"What do you want me to do?" Bergeot said in a lively voice.

"Suppress the paper and arrest Mathieu. We are fighting for our lives, we can't afford weakness."

Bergeot was silent. He did not want to upset the banker's idea of him as a man of ruthlessness and energy. But he did not want to start suppressions. He saw a way out by accusing Mathieu and leaped at it.

"My dear Robert, I know all about Louis Mathieu. He's discontented, ambitious, a Jew. I have my eye on him.

But don't ask me to put him on his guard at this moment."

Thiviers opened his eyes.

"You know something about him?"

"I'm keeping him under observation." Bergeot felt uncomfortable. He went on recklessly, "You can be sure I shall know when to cut him off. Just now it's useful to have him at large. . . ." He saw Mathieu on the day some of his schoolfellows decided to punish him mildly for having been born a Jew. They were content to knock him into the gutter. Mud from head to foot, he limped away, only saying to Bergeot, who had been watching it with disgust and fear, "You could have stopped them. . . ."

"Very well, I leave it to your judgement." Thiviers smiled. "There was something else I had to say to you. About your investments——"

"Oh, that I leave to your judgement," Bergeot cried. "Do what you like with my money. If it weren't for you I shouldn't have any. I don't pretend to be able to make fifty francs into a thousand."

Mme de Freppel's voice made them both jump. She had come into the room through the second door, at their back. There was no keeping her out of the Prefect's room when she wanted to see him; his clerks had given up trying. If she chose, she could reach it by a second staircase.

"No, you're an idiot about money, my dear Émile!"

She came forward quickly. She had bare arms, as delicate as a girl's, and a light dress. Standing in front of him, her hands behind her back, body thrust forward, she repeated sharply.

"Yes, an idiot. I believe you would really rather be poor. You think it's a sign of honesty. It's nothing of the kind, it's stupidity and conceit."

Bergeot pointed at his desk.

"Look at my work waiting for me." . . .

But as soon as he was alone he felt restless. He had failed — he would always fail — to be simple and dignified. He had had to exert himself, to tell lies, to be familiar. He was always straining to cover the gap between himself and what people expected of him. I should like to know no one, he thought, discouraged.

It was a lie. Already his confidence was pouring back. He looked round the room — at the Renaissance fireplace with the arms of the Duc de Seuilly, at the panelled cup-

boards. I'm here, he thought, stretching his arms. I, Jean-Émile Bergeot. He felt ruthless and gentle, serious and gay. One of Marguerite's gloves was lying under the window. He picked it up, small, a little shabby. She had a habit of putting new things away for a year or two before taking them into wear. It was ridiculous and miserly. It belonged to her past, which he knew to have been difficult. Poor child, he thought, folding the glove.

The door opened softly. Lucien Sugny poked his head round. When he saw that the Prefect was alone he came in, carrying a pile of opened letters.

"What, more of them?" Bergeot said joyfully.

Chapter 6

WHEN Mme de Freppel went shopping, if it were only for a reel of cotton, she felt all the anxieties of a peasant. She tried to see everything at once, every ambush. Caught at the right moment, even her enemy, the manageress of the fur department at Caillemer's, could be outwitted. This morning when she went in, she knew, from the sight of a curtain twitched aside and the reddened eyelids of the younger saleswoman, that it was a bad day. But she had half an hour to put in. A fox cape lying across a roll of black foulard delighted her; she was pinching it when her enemy came up. "Good morning, Madame."

"Good-morning. You're not showing much, are you?"

"If Madame wishes to see furs," the woman said. Pretending to rearrange it, she whisked the cape from Mme de Freppel's hand.

"That's not a bad cape."

"It's a finer cape than Madame could buy in many Paris houses. The furs are chosen, each is perfect. When shall we see another like it? Not while this war lasts."

"This terrible war," Marguerite said: "let me try it on."

She looked at herself in the long glass, her glance seeking, probing her likeness for some reassurance — she had no idea

what, but she could stand for a long time looking at herself in a glass, and forget that there was anyone else in the room. She noticed that the light in the fur took away the slight sallowness of her skin, but that was not the reassurance she wanted. She wanted some sign, to tell her who she was. Who it was stared back at her from eyes clouded by too many tricks, calculations, necessary lies. This body she had brought so far on her road mocked her ; it knew more than she did ; and stood there keeping its secrets. . . . She sighed, and came back to herself, to the over-warm room and the dislike and hovering watchfulness of the other woman. She stroked the fur with her gloved hand.

"Yes, it's not bad."

A too familiar greed seized her, with the illusion that she had never coveted anything as she coveted this fur. It would give her courage and protect her. Taking it off with a pretence of carelessness, she handed it back. "What are you asking for it ?"

"Twenty thousand francs."

"Preposterous."

The thought of giving away so much money frightened her. She was torn by two savage claws. To possess something without a flaw, to be truly elegant ! But to rob herself of twenty thousand francs — oh, impossible. She smiled. "It would be dear at fifteen thousand."

The manageress was replacing the cape. "Madame is mistaken. It is priced under rather than over its value."

"Nonsense. It's no use talking to me like that. I might manage seventeen thousand."

The manageress spread her hands without answering. Marguerite turned away with an air of decision and went out ; she felt uncertain, almost ill. When she stepped out of Caillemer's into the blinding sunlight, she noticed a wretched mongrel limping along the gutter. At the sight of it, and because the sun was pricking her eyelids, she slipped back twenty-five years : to a moment — she was fifteen — when she was kneeling in a dusty road, crying over the body of just such an ugly starved animal. She had bare feet, covered with dust, her dress was almost indecently ragged, her eyes ached from crying in the strong sun. The man who had always said he was her father was watching her. "Come, that's enough, you may pull the cart yourself now," he said impatiently. He fastened the harness to a belt he took off

and put round her skinny waist ; they set off down the road into Nantes, her body under its rags chafed by the belt, her eyes dry now with dismay. . . . Mme de Freppel's hands shook a little as she opened her sunshade : she was not ashamed of the fifteen-year-old girl, she thought of her often, always with the same astonishment that she had been able to escape. And pride. She felt herself becoming rigid with pride ; an insane excitement filled her. Turning blindly and quickly, she went back into the shop.

" Ask M. Caillemer if he will take seventeen thousand for the cape."

" It's not very likely, Madame. You understand, it's——"

" Ask him," she said rudely, pushing the woman aside with her voice.

She waited, confused, feeling herself a stiff insensible knot in the brightly-active web of the shop. M. Caillemer approached, an ungenerous smile clapped on his face ; she knew he was going to agree. She felt a pang of dismay : her nerves relaxed and her fear and uncertainty rushed back.

" Madame is getting a bargain."

" Send it to me to the Manor House." She was dry and unfriendly. Wretched at the thought of the money she had spent, she went out again. The possessive fury had gone ; it might never have been there : nothing consoled her for the mistake she had made, least of all the cape, hanging small and draggled in a corner of her mind. What a fool I've been, she thought, exasperated and baffled.

She was going to see her closest friend, her only close friend. Mme Vayrac lived not far from the Abbey Church of St. Peter. The courtyard had two entrances : the one used by Mme Vayrac's friends was a narrow door leading into a walled-in cloister, carpeted in red, the walls hung with curtains in heavy red and black brocade. It was the most relentlessly carpeted and curtained house in Seuilly ; silk draped the sides of mirrors, bedsteads, dressing-tables, thick carpets hid every inch of wood or stone in the rooms and on the stairs. Far more than her car and her jewels, these carpets gave Mme Vayrac the sense of her luxury.

From the disguised cloister a staircase led to the first floor. Marguerite passed, without greeting her, a handsome young woman in a dressing-gown. She went directly to her friend's sitting-room. It was a large room, so over-furnished

that a stranger would look all round it before discovering Mme Vayrac sitting, like a snail, among whorled cushions.

She was older than Mme de Freppel, a woman of fifty-two or three, shapeless and uncorseted, with the face of an intelligent and battered clown, dark eyes, a loose handsome mouth with upturned corners. A slight lameness of one leg made her prefer to sit : everything she needed, a decanter of sherry, crystallised fruits, skeins of silk, a box holding rouge and headache powders, in arm's reach. She pressed her cheek against Marguerite's and made room for her on the couch.

"Well, my dear?"

"I passed one of your nieces on the half-landing," Mme de Freppel said. "I think, a new one."

"She came last night. From Lille. She's placed already."

Mme de Freppel was not listening. She was stretching herself at her end of the couch, kicking off her shoes, adjusting a suspender. She began to repair her face, moist from the heat. This was the only place outside her own bedroom where she felt no need to behave politely. She could say what she was thinking, be indiscreet, violent, foolish.

"Léonie, I've bought a fur cape. It's a beautiful thing, but I can't afford it. Do you feel like buying it off me?"

"What did you pay for it?" Léonie asked. Her voice had a precise muted resonance, very like the sounds made by a worn-out piano.

Mme de Freppel hesitated. Her friend was rich. "Twenty thousand francs."

"Too much for me. If it would help you, I'd give you seventeen." Her fingers, crossed on her stomach, moved as she counted.

"I'll wait," Mme de Freppel said evasively. With the idea of parting from it, the fur recovered its gloss. And now that she could. She felt light-hearted. Jumping up, she ran across the room to a long mirror, and stood smoothing her frock.

"Do you remember dancing between two mirrors in that café in Brussels?" Léonie said, smiling.

"But I can still kick over my head."

Pulling dress and petticoat to her waist, she stood in creased drawers and flung her leg — it was shapely but not slim — straight out and up, holding it steady for a second.

She fell back into a chair. Mme Vayrac laughed at her. They sat without speaking for a few minutes, in a warmth which reached them more easily than the heat filtering into the room from outside ; it came from a past of stuffy rooms in hotels, third-class railway carriages where they clung together for a little warmth, glances exchanged across café tables, lies one of them had told and the other sworn to, all the thumbed greasy acts of a past far enough away now to seem like a guilty childhood.

"I shan't soon forget you in Brussels," Mme Vayrac said. "You were so ill, sweat running off you with pain, my hands shook holding the brandy to give you when you came off. Anyone else would have given in. But you had spunk for a dozen."

"I don't remember leaving," Marguerite said. "I remember you lying on me in that ghastly room afterwards, to warm me."

"Help me up," Léonie said, "we'll have lunch."

She stooped to lift out of its basket a poodle, still young, but too fat to enjoy walking, and took him with them into the dining-room. He had his chair at table and his plate of chicken. Mme Vayrac sent the servant away. She began to talk with a gentle amusement about two old gentlemen, a Senator, and a collector of church tapestries, who had been staying in the house : except that they could walk, they had the habits of the poodle. She laughed, shaking her breasts.

"Which of them will get your newest niece ?"

"Neither." Frowning, Mme Vayrac sucked the edge of a sleeve she had trailed in a sauce-boat. "Help yourself, my love. Do you remember what you said after Freppel asked you to marry him ? . . . 'Léonie, if I like I can eat lobster every day of my life now. . . .' He wasn't a bad sort, Freppel."

"I wrote to him again last week," Marguerite said abruptly, "asking him if he would change his mind and divorce me. After all, the war . . ."

"He never will," Léonie said quietly. "Men of his good sort are not generous."

Marguerite did not answer. She would never admit, not even to this woman who knew every blemish of her body and soul, the humiliation she felt at not being able to move her husband, that weak limited man. On the day she left him, he who had always been so anxious to please her, became

severe and immovable. Neither tears nor sarcasm took on him, he was too eager to punish her — for the insult to his name, he said. As if a name shakes with jealousy and grief ! For the first time her will had beaten on an object that deflected it, and she felt her failure as a flaw in herself, an aching joint. Even now, when she remembered it, she felt weak and old. Her fear of losing Bergeot sprang through her other fears — for her money, her health, looks.

“D’you ever think of going back to him ?” Léonie asked.

“Never.”

“Well, my dear girl, I wish I could help you.”

She sank into Léonie’s love and faithfulness. Dear Léonie, who lied to everyone else, whose way of life, to put it civilly, was equivocal, but to one person, to her friend, was honesty itself, purity itself. A gentle happiness passed into her, coming from Léonie’s heavy body and easy maternal lips.

Mme Vayrac was expecting a visitor : he arrived when they went back into the sitting-room. He came in holding his hat, shockingly new, in both hands, bowing over it. His eyes, lively and lifeless pieces of flesh, looked at both women with the same impersonal calculation. He kissed Léonie’s hand. Below the waist, his body filled out like a vase ; he was nearly bald ; long hair, starting from the crown of his head, was cut in a fringe above a white neck. He smiled with great sweetness, turning up his eyes slightly : this smile, intended to charm, was defensive. Léonie presented him : he bowed again, with exaggerated dignity.

“Sit down, Sadinsky. Now, tell me — you can speak quite frankly before the Countess — have you been able to settle the things we discussed ?”

“Thank you, yes.” M. Sadinsky had a delightful voice, sympathetic and rounded. “I have all the documents I need, and they are in order. All.”

“Sadinsky came here from Roumania, from Bucharest, three months ago,” Léonie said, glancing at her friend, “and of course, after he got here, he had to regularise his position.”

“Of course,” Mme de Freppel said, smiling. Her smile was meant to reassure M. Sadinsky : she was not one of those obtuse people who refuse to understand that a Jew must use any means he can to get himself into a country where at least he will not be persecuted, and at best may

settle down and become respectable, even respected ; she did not object to his slipping into the country and afterwards buying himself some sort of citizenship. He would either join the pullulating mass of refugees, living pitifully by obscure shifts. Or he would climb out, his smile, his wits, his charming voice, so many papillae to cling where they touched. Glancing at him, at his broadcloth trousers and morning coat, she saw that he was outside the anonymous crowd already ; in a week or two he would remember to brush the scurf from his collar ; a little later, someone would brush it off for him.

" I don't know Bucharest," she said kindly.

" A handsome city," M. Sadinsky murmured. His eyes, looking backward, reminded you of oil-wells ; they were deep, obviously, but any light falling on them was turned back at the surface ; only the surface moved. He turned his palms out, offering the heat, the rich smells, the feminine luxury and brutality of eastern Europe.

" Why did you come to Seuilly ? Why not Paris ? "

Rolling his lips, M. Sadinsky said softly, " I was invited to come here. You know, one needs an invitation now to enter another country. The age of freedom is over. . . . I had a relative here. And then I had a link with Mme Vayrac. I knew her son when he was in Roumania."

Marguerite did not look at Léonie to see whether this reference to her son affected her. Edgar Vayrac was in prison ; he had been there more than eight months ; luckily for him, he was arrested six weeks before the outbreak of war : when he was arrested it was because the funds were missing of a half-political organisation he directed, a league formed to provide gymnasia for boys and youths, and blessed by the deputy for Seuilly, M. Huet : after he had been in prison a month, the rumours began. Had he in fact sold information about the garrison in Seuilly ? The whole affair was heavy with judicial mystery. It was from his mother's agitation that Marguerite suspected as much as she knew.

" Give me a cigarette," Léonie said.

She was half lying on the couch, her legs doubled under her ; her large body seemed to flow as far as her knees and there stop. Her face when she was not talking became dull, a piece of finger-marked flesh.

" Sadinsky is going to ask you to do something, my love. He has a scheme. We've discussed it together. I told him

I knew you could help him. He thinks — I think, too — that we ought to be doing much more to rouse national feeling in the Department. He's anxious to help——”

“I see the dangers that threaten France,” M. Sadinsky said in a low voice. He looked in front of him.

“His idea is to form a Joan of Arc League for women. The members would pledge themselves to France; they would wear a badge, hold meetings sometimes — with banners. The League would grow, it would spread to other Departments, to Paris. It could become a big movement.”

“It will need money,” Marguerite said, frowning.

“There will be no subscription,” M. Sadinsky said quickly and firmly. “Except, of course, voluntary gifts. The members must buy their badges. That's all. I know an artist who will design the badge. It will cost a little to manufacture. Perhaps we shall make a small, naturally a very small, profit on it — who knows?”

He looked at her with his charming smile.

“What Sadinsky wants you to do,” Léonie said gently, “is— You know Madame Huet, don't you?”

“The wife of the deputy for Seuilley,” M. Sadinsky said, pressing on the word deputy. You saw, as though a sea plant were closing round the pebble dropped in it, all the antennae moving one way.

“Yes, yes,” Marguerite said.

She frowned again, without knowing it. Her jealousy of Andrée Huet — she had known her for six years — had so many roots that it might have been planted in her when she was born. In effect, it was. It had pushed up first when she saw a child of her own age point at her from a motor-car: it grew in her with her senses, with every blow, every injury. She nourished it in squalid rooms and among the spittle of cheap cafés. It was already flowering, ready to attach itself to some one person, the day of her first meeting with Mme Huet. No one would have guessed that she felt diminished by the other woman's insolent politeness, the tricks of speech and gesture taken down obediently from an ancestor who governed for Charles V, or that her clothes, down to her chemise, had become vulgar by contrast with clothes made only for the niece of a Councillor of the Bank of France. She held a sarcastic smile between herself and Mme Huet's wit, she was even flippant; and all the time the edge of the gutter was cutting her naked little bottom and a shred of newspaper

flickered out of her claw in the freezing wind.

"Yes, I know her, but not well," she repeated drily.

"I'm sure you know her well enough," Léonie said, with the insidious warmth she could roll into her voice. "All we want you to do, my dear Marguerite, is to ask her to see Sadinsky, so that he can explain his scheme and invite her to be a patroness. It's very simple."

M. Sadinsky looked at Marguerite as though they were already close friends. "May I hope that the Countess will patronise it too?"

"Why do you want Madame Huet?"

Léonie pressed out her cigarette, crushing it with her strong fingers. "Because," she said, smiling, "if we have her, we shall get the duchesses. One must have duchesses for these things. It's a pity."

Marguerite could not help laughing: she was delighted by the contempt in her friend's voice, contempt of the adroit female for the lady; she felt an avid sympathy with it. She laughed, looking into Mme Vayrac's eyes.

"I can't promise anything," she said to Sadinsky. "Madame Huet is not easy——"

"But you understand," M. Sadinsky said softly, "I shall try to please your great Madame Huet. Perhaps I can do it by giving money to something of hers. If you persuade her to invite me to her house I shall hand you five thousand francs for some charity, any charity you like. I shan't ask what you give it to. Perhaps ten thousand."

He stood up. This time, with an air of tenderness, he kissed Mme de Freppel's hand, and moved backwards skilfully until he was at the door. He opened it widely enough to pass his body through, squeezing his buttocks against the sides. After he had gone, there was a moment's silence, then Léonie said,

"I think you needn't get rid of your fur cape yet. Wait." Without raising her voice or looking up, she went on, "Now I must talk to you a little about Edgar. His affair has dragged on long enough, I want him home. Why not? I can pay back the money he lost — poor boy, he ought not to have agreed to be the treasurer, he doesn't understand figures. But why put him in prison for it? It's absurd. Marguerite, I think of him every night. I begin with his feet, and think of him upwards to his face; sometimes I can't see it clearly. I must, yes, get him out."

She was speaking calmly, but a thread of sorrow had been caught up by her voice and twisted round it. It was more moving than if she had cried. Had anyone seen Léonie cry? What sort of dregs — or mother, don't they call it? — would be emptied out of eyes so used as hers? She looks older than she is, Marguerite thought. She took Léonie's hand; it was unresponsive; she had to draw hers back, foolishly.

"What more can we do?" she asked.

She knew what had been done. Edgar Vayrac's lawyer had named an examining magistrate, Maître Naquet, as a pliant sensible fellow. Bergeot was on good terms with the Minister: pressed by Léonie, she had coaxed him to write a letter, and in due time the case was given into the sensible old fellow's hands. After this, Maître Naquet was reminded delicately of the vices he had enjoyed during his life of careful magistrate and faithful dependent husband. There were too many of these; at his age, if the stories became known, he would look very foolish as the gay seducer. In the examinations nothing surprising emerged except that Edgar Vayrac had spent his own money on the organisation. The magistrate — indiscreet, but why not? — let it be known.

Léonie raised her eyebrows. "My dear, it would be perfectly easy to get the boy released and the case postponed indefinitely. He has plenty of useful friends. The Public Prosecutor himself — I had to see him the other day privately to pay arrears of taxes——"

"Arrears of taxes?" Marguerite said blankly.

"Don't be absurd," Mme Vayrac said, smiling.

"Well?"

"Well. He had nothing against my boy, he has always believed that he is innocent. Of course he's innocent. He's very naughty sometimes and then he does something so delicious you can't help forgiving him."

Does she believe this? Marguerite wondered. When Edgar was ten, living in the country with foster-parents, the woman wrote asking his mother to take him away. Léonie was ill, and Marguerite went down to find out what was wrong: she saw the boy first; he looked at her from clear grey eyes — he was a tall fair child, as handsome as an angel — and said, "I've always been good." She spoke to the foster-mother. "He's cruel," the woman said uneasily: she showed the arms of her own child, blackened from wrist

to shoulder by Edgar's pinches. "I won't keep him, I tell you he's bad. . . ."

"If only that devil Mathieu could be silenced," Mme Vayrac said quietly. "They're all afraid of the nonsense he might write about it. I believe that if the Prefect sent for him, and told him not to make trouble because Edgar had been released — and explain . . ." Her frank smile made her look as though she were lying. "I've bribed as many people as I can, it would be no use trying to bribe Mathieu."

"You want me to talk to Émile?"

"Yes," Léonie said in a humble voice.

Marguerite looked away. She was reluctant to mix Émile in Edgar Vayrac's affair; it could turn out badly. Easy to promise and then do nothing, but — with Léonie — that would be no use.

Mme Vayrac moved quickly and softly off the couch. She put her arms round her friend, and began in her softest voice, scarcely moving her lips. "You will help me, won't you? Yes, I know you will. We understand each other. My sweet girl, I love you so much: do you remember the time when we were starving, and I stole for us? Yes, of course you do. You will help, won't you? It's absolutely simple. Isn't it? Yes, yes."

Mme Freppel felt ashamed of her caution.

"I'll talk to Émile," she said, putting into her voice all the sincerity she did not feel.

Chapter 7

MME DE FREPPEL'S bedroom looked across the unshaven lawn to the Loire. She enjoyed lying in bed, propped up so that she could see the river: at night she had the shutters folded back so that her first glance in the morning rested on it, clear, or doubled by mist, or the surface raised by the reflection on it of the clouds. When in other rooms she woke facing a wall, or trees not able to touch a river with their farthest root, she felt cheated.

Tonight she went to bed early, after a disappointment.

When she came home from seeing Mme Vayrac, Bergeot telephoned to say he would come to dinner. He did not come. Lucien Sugny rang up and said that the Prefect had been summoned by General Piriac and would come when he could. Vexed, she lay in bed waiting for him. At one moment she fell asleep, and saw him looking down at her with a contorted face, swollen and wavering. She sat up in terror, pushing the sheet from her so that it was heaped up like the Loire running against a sand-bank. If he left me, I should have no one, she thought. She felt stupid with dismay. She thought of her husband : his habit of rubbing his nails together had been born in him with his sense of his duty as a landowner : he was stiff and conscientious, and she disliked him more than if he had injured her. I couldn't go back to him, she thought ; I should be alone.

Insensibly, the thought of Émile dying became the fear that he would tire of her : she would see him trying, out of pity, to hide his boredom ; it would break out in criticisms of her, she would resent them, there would be tears, anger, reconciliation, pity, hate, boredom. . . . She looked at her arms, as firm as a girl's, and pressed her hands on her body. Even while she was thinking, I'm not young, she felt certain that he was bound to her by ties as strong, as mysteriously carnal and immaterial, as those binding some children — not all — to their mother. He depended on her. From the pressure of her fingers on her arm sprang the familiar and hated thought that she herself would die. It faded quickly, drowned by the louder fear of losing her money.

"This war," she said, with despair.

Poverty had its clear image in her mind : the bed with tumbled sheets pushed against a wall, the noises of the street splitting her skull as though her skull were the walls of the room, the print on the soles of her feet of the stringy carpet. To be tumbled back to it, she thought : at my age. She knew she had lost the resilience and greedy strength of her body.

She tried to lose herself in an image of the Loire, flowing in darkness at the other side of the shutters, in the night of France, offering — to the Atlantic on one side, on the other to the enemy — its valleys and high pastures, its cathedrals, old and new houses, vines, olives, walnuts, its Maginot line of thrift and freedom, and the bodies of its men and children. But her nerves were on edge. She began to be angry with

Émile. . . . It was after midnight when she heard him coming along the corridor, and at once forgot her annoyance in the urgency of what she had to say to him.

He was tired. He seated himself on the side of the bed and said vehemently,

"That old fool Piriac. What d'you think he wanted?"

"Flattery."

"Of course. He read me his speech to the League of Frenchwomen next Tuesday. About Joan of Arc, of course, and terribly muddled. I think he believes sometimes that he's fighting the English. I tried to talk to him about the war, but it was useless. After two minutes he was hearing voices. . . . Rest me."

He leaned back, with his head on her shoulder. Putting her hand on his forehead, she felt the blood beating in his temples. "You do far too much. When is this war going to end?"

"I don't know. Not for years."

"We ought to think about our future," she said calmly. "Thiviers thinks we ought to put some of our money in America, so that we're not ruined at the end of the war. Or if we're defeated. He can arrange it for us. I told him to send as much of mine away as he can, at once."

Bergeot frowned and sat up. "Do you know what you're doing? It will be a frightful scandal if you're found out. I couldn't protect you. And apart from that, it's abominably unpatriotic. You'd better see Thiviers tomorrow and tell him you've changed your mind. You must."

She did not answer. What did he see when he thought of poverty? Not a shabby dress, stained under the arms, not his wife bending over a pan at the sink, her nails scraping into the cracks. Patriotism — a cloud floating at a great height, and men gaping at it.

She slipped easily into her part, the more easily that she was absolutely sincere.

"Why have you moved? Please listen, my darling. We've had four years. We've been happy. Why? Not simply because we have each other, but because you have your work. Would you be satisfied with an ordinary life? Never. And you need money, enough to be independent: it's the same in politics as in everything else, if you have money, and don't need help, people will offer to help you. You want to get on in politics, don't you? You won't do it

as a poor man. You must be safe — and for us, too, so that we can be happy, and grow to look like each other. Old husbands and wives do, you know. . . . Let Robert send part of your money to the States. You can trust him, he is fond of you."

She let two tears roll over her cheeks. "Have you a handkerchief?" she said, smiling. She turned her head away, so that her tears ran into the pillow. She was crying without a sound. "My life hasn't been easy," she said with her poor little smile.

Émile bent over her. "My dear love. What is it?"

"You could make us safe," she said, pressing his cheek against hers. "It's much easier than listening to an old idiot pretending to be Joan of Arc. You haven't a great deal of money, it will make no difference to the country — and to me, all the difference between happiness and a dreadful anxiety."

"Very well," he said quietly. "I agree."

She was afraid of rousing mistrust and resentment in him if she showed her thankfulness. But her relief was so great now that she had relaxed, that it showed in her face; it became paler and older. He saw it; and the conviction that he had made a grave mistake vanished, in his pity for her. To reassure her — she might think he had made a sacrifice — he turned brusquely to something else.

"What did you do today?" he asked.

"I had lunch with Léonie," she said gratefully. "She wants you to speak to your friend Mathieu about Edgar. If the police were sure they could do it quietly, they would release him — provisionally—" She was deliberately being clumsy, so that he could get rid of Léonie of his resentment and doubts. And she would be able to tell Léonie that she had done her best.

"My God, I like her impudence," he said, with sudden fury. "The fellow is a common swindler. He hasn't been charged with spying or he wouldn't be sitting comfortably in prison. But I shouldn't be surprised if he were a German agent — at least an Italian one. And I'm told he had a brothel in Nantes. And she wants to loose him on society again. I won't do a thing to help her."

"He's her son," she murmured.

"Then she's responsible for him," Bergeot said. "Don't let's talk about him."

He undressed and came back to her. Almost as soon as he lay down he fell asleep, but she was awake for a long time, reluctant to move the arm she had stretched under his head. With her free hand she felt his side and shoulder and the back of his head. The bones were very close under his skin : she felt afraid ; it is so easy to kill men ; their thin covering of skin is no cover. An accident, a trifle of violence, and Émile's courage and nervous life would slip out. Take care of him, take care of him, she said soundlessly — speaking to the featureless severity she believed in. She felt heavy with her faults, lies, cowardice, greed. Nothing in her was sound except her love for Émile, her ambitions for Émile, her pleasure in Émile. . . . She moved, drawing away her arm.

Chapter 8

LUCIEN SUGNY took his morning coffee onto the north terrace. The sun — it was not seven o'clock yet — was already the same no-colour, the colour of molten heat, as the sky. Light sprang back from the roofs of houses at the foot of the cliff, from the Loire itself, and ripples of light were beginning to mask the town and the fields beyond the town. Lucien thought, as he did every morning at this time, that his life was perfect : he would have run the length of the terrace if he had not been afraid that even out here, at this hour, he could be seen. He sat still, the figure of a sober secretary. . . . Seuilly had been taken by the Germans — except the Prefecture, which was holding out on its cliff : his job was to fire off the machine-gun at the head of the slope while the Prefect and Mme de Freppel, in the dress she had worn at dinner, slipped away. He was wounded. She came running back — Lucien, you're hurt ! — No, Marguerite, I'm dying. Or should it be, No, I'm dying, Madame . . . ? Her lips brushed his, she leaned her warm body along his, rapidly growing cold . . . You could invent something more original, he thought angrily. Need you, because you're not a soldier, become an idiot ?

He rushed indoors and switched on the wireless in time

to hear the communiqué. A patrol encounter east of the Moselle ended to our advantage. There have been more artillery actions east of the Vosges. The German High Command states that two British planes were brought down in the North Sea. . . . That was all. Except for the French and the Germans, the two invariable actors, Europe had nothing it wanted to say: there were no signals from Norway: in Spain, no Republican peasants had been released from prison to work in the olive fields; the Italians, except an orator who demanded Marseilles, because it was Roman — why not the whole of France, to the Loire? — were quiet; Poland and Czechoslovakia were as quiet as death. All Europe — apart from a patch of ground near the Moselle, another in the Vosges, and an undefined patch of the North Sea — was perfectly peaceful; men stretching themselves in the early sun, women moving about their houses. . . . Lucien switched off. He went out again. The sunlight tickled the back of his neck; he turned round to feel its fingers on his face. . . . What am I missing by staying here? Obviously nothing.

Later in the morning, Mme de Freppel came into his room from the Prefect's. He jumped up, dropping a file of papers; it opened, they slid over the floor and he had to stoop, knocking his glasses off on the edge of the chair. He groped for them with a cry of horror.

"Are they broken?" Mme de Freppel asked.

"I don't know. No. Thank heaven."

"But, child, they could have been mended," she said, laughing at him.

Lucien did not care to explain that by the time he had sent two-thirds of his small salary to his mother to help her with the younger children, what was left scarcely mended his shoes and bought him half an hour at a café twice a week. There was no virtue in his generosity; it was habit: before he could speak, when he was cutting his teeth on his father's clumsy silver watch, he had noticed that everything went round in the family circle. He blinked politely at Mme de Freppel, then put his glasses on and saw her clearly again. She was still beautiful. And he had nothing to give her. He looked at the window and offered her the immense bell of the sky tolling sunlight, with the branches of the magnolia across the dusty panes and half-open shutters.

"A magnificent day."

"You ought to be outside," Mme de Freppel said kindly.

Did she mean he ought to be in the army? But he knew that. Closing his eyes, he said rapidly,

"If you would only persuade the Prefect to send me away. It's all nonsense about my eyesight. I saw a tank officer in glasses yesterday. After all, you sit in the tank, you drive it over everything, it's not a question of avoiding things. In a tank I couldn't conceivably go wrong. . . ."

He heard her laugh. When he looked at her, she patted his cheek with a cool hand.

"Goodness, Lucien, you're burning." She laid her hand on his forehead. "No, you're all right, it's only your cheeks."

The young man felt himself turning giddy. He stood still, enduring his uncomfortable happiness, beating his mind for something to say. She would think him a bore.

"You agree that I ought to be fighting?" he said stiffly.

"Not for a minute."

"All my friends are in the army. I don't like to sit here in luxury when they . . . why must you laugh?"

"Your idea of luxury, my poor child. Shut up here to wear your suit out. They could at least give you a leather chair. Shall I ask for one for you? I'm very good at asking."

"You ought not to need to ask," Lucien said quietly, "you should be given . . . everything . . . you're too good."

"That's charming."

Lucien was seized by a rash self-confidence. "I should like to get into the army," he said, frowning at her, "because of the others. For everything else, I would rather stay where I can see you."

"Now you're really talking nonsense," Mme de Freppel said lightly. "I came to ask you for something, a little notepaper — no, not the plain. I want something impressive. Give me some sheets of your official notepaper."

Lucien handed over a packet. He felt extremely uncomfortable, but dared not refuse. Besides, if he had done wrong, it was for her; that itself was exhilarating. When she had gone he felt the room too small to hold him and rushed to open the shutters. Let the sun try to knock him down. He took his jacket off; then, remembering the neat patches on his shirt, put it on again quickly. . . .

Mme de Freppel wrote two letters :

" *Léonie, my love, I spoke to Émile last night about Edgar. He's not enthusiastic, he seems to know something, perhaps you'd better have fewer nieces to stay with you for the next month or two, if you can curb your generous soul. I'll talk to him again, I've no doubt I can bring him round in time. Léonie, what strange lives we have had. Sometimes I dream I'm young, I see myself in a glass, my face smooth, and such colour, too. Last night I dreamed we were in a field, I caught my foot and fell, there was water under the grass and I was choking, drowning. I thought you would drag me out. But you didn't move . . .*"

Why am I writing such nonsense ? she thought, frowning. She tore off the last lines and scribbled, "*Now for your friend Sadinsky. He means to go into politics, I can see that. If I help him to get his spoon into the dish, what is there in it for me ? Love. M. de F.*"

To Sadinsky she wrote civilly that she had been thinking about his Joan of Arc League. Was the deputy's wife really the best patroness ? The way to approach her would be to make a gift to one of her war charities, a handsome gift. "*But do not give away any money until I advise you. If you have money, you can buy anything in France. Believe me, I shall do my best to help you.*"

Signing her name, she smiled. I'm cleverer than most people, she thought, excited.

She went out on to the terrace. It was too hot to stand here, and it was happiness. All the roads of the province, she could see two of them sauntering to see what they could pick up in the way of trees, villages, small woods, all the fields in which only women and old men were left to labour, the empty village streets, blanched by the sun, came to an end in her. She felt an impulse to take the train and look at the towns where she had been starved as a child ; she would show them that compared with her they were helpless. And, too, there she had been young.

One of these days, she thought, Émile and I will be living in Paris.

Chapter 9

RIENNE finished the letter he was writing to his sister, and placed it at the side of his desk, for his orderly. The man would look here and nowhere else. He knew Rienne's habits—for the matter of that, they had not changed since the Polytechnique, where he taught himself to keep on two shelves all he possessed. He picked up the book he was reading: a bound copy of *Servitude et grandeur militaires*. Absurd to say that he was reading it; he had read it only once, the first time, when he was a cadet. Since then he listened to Vigny as an older experienced friend, they were together in the last war. He saw to it that Vigny shared all his tastes, for simple classical music, Anjou wine, black honey. Thanks to Vigny, he had never fallen into the error of hoping to be rewarded for making courage his profession: since it was his duty to kill men, he killed, but he never pretended to be their judge.

After a minute, he put the book away on its shelf, took up his tunic and was fastening it when Bergeot came in. They dined together at least one evening a week.

"I'm late."

"You're always late," Rienne said. "You were late every time I bought tickets for a play. The whole time we were in Paris together, when you were at the Law School, I never saw a first act——"

"And you always said it must have been the best," Bergeot grinned. He sat on the edge of the bed, amused and alert. As always, his friend's monastic room roused in him an impulse the rest of his life cancelled. Why not give up everything, the distractions, the frightful nuisance of other people? With miserly care he could live on the interest from his savings. He could write—he had always wanted to. . . . And Marguerite? . . . His impulse mocked him. You living out of sight! Without excitements, ambition, notice. You a poor scholar! He rushed back head-first into the appalling confusion of his life.

"Where shall we go?" Rienne asked.

"We always go to Buran's. Don't you like it?"

It vexed Rienne to have to explain that he no longer felt

comfortable in the Hôtel Buran, where none of the prohibitions were obeyed, and you could order anything you liked. The orders, he knew nothing about it, might be silly, but they were orders. Outside the hotel they were enforced : a workman could not sit drinking brandy every day of the week.

"Very well." When they were crossing the courtyard he said, as if it had just struck him, "Why not go to Marie's for once ? She needs the money."

Bergeot shrugged his shoulders. "If you like."

It was still airlessly hot ; the evening had stretched itself along the Loire, without finding there any freshness. They sauntered. "I have something to ask you," Rienne said. "You know the internment camp at Geulin——"

Bergeot made a wry face. "Too well. The medical officer reported this week that sixteen more of the men have died. Influenza. I ask you — in this weather ! I asked him why he didn't inoculate the rest, but it seems there's no serum, or none to spare. Well, they must die. I can't save them."

"There's one man I want to save, an ex-Imperial officer called Uhland. Joachim von Uhland. Mathieu vouches for him. I want you to get him out."

An ironical look crossed Bergeot's face. "Louis ? Why doesn't he come to me himself ?"

"You know as well as I do. He can't bring himself to ask favours."

"He asked you. . . . No, no, let him ask."

Rienne smiled. "When are you going to forgive him for taking the history mentions away from you ? Good heavens, it's thirty-three years."

Bergeot frowned with annoyance and resentment, then shook himself and burst out laughing. If he had not laughed, he would have suffered : his self-esteem was nearer the surface than any of his other qualities except a nervous pity, the mildest touch reached it.

"Very well, I'll find out about your Boche," he said boisterously : "if he's in order I'll slip him out. But tell Louis not to dodge me. As for his history medal — it hasn't got him very far, has it ?"

They had reached the café at the end of the embankment. It was closed. A scrap of paper had been fastened to the shutter — *Open tomorrow*. Marie came out, followed so

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closely by a soldier that he knocked into her when she stopped to speak to Rienne. Only two evenings ago she had been shabby. Now, when she no longer needed it to heighten her colour, she had tied a scarlet handkerchief at her throat and covered her white blouse by a jacket with scarlet buttons. She was radiant. Hatless, she had smoothed her hair with a piece of silk until it shone. As soon as she saw Rienne she moved her hands in the gesture of a young woman showing off her child.

"You see, he's here. He came this afternoon. Until tomorrow. We have until then, but first we must go and see his mother." She caught sight of the Prefect behind Rienne's shoulder, and turned the colour of her handkerchief. "Excuse me," she murmured.

Pierre was standing stiffly, looking straight in front of him — but he had placed himself so that this allowed him to look at his wife. When Bergeot held out his hand, Pierre first saluted, then gripped the Prefect's hand so that the bones came together. Bergeot endured it with his friendly smile.

"Where are you stationed?" he asked.

Pierre did not answer for a minute. Then, looking down, he said, "In the Maginot."

"Ah, I forgot," Bergeot said, smiling at Marie, "you mustn't even tell your wife, must you?"

"No," Pierre said.

The glance he gave his wife was an appeal, he was begging her to rescue him. She understood it. He was never able to talk to other people, her Pierre; he said little even to his wife: everything was said between them without a word when he gave his thin muscular body into her arms. She would not forget the day he left; he lay beside her in their bed all night, wide awake, stretched on his back with his hands under his head, not moving: only when it was time to get up he clung to her and said, "Marie . . . Marie . . ." more like a child clutching her than a man. And this had tortured her, because he was strong, he was never afraid of anything, and he could lift her in one hand. She could not comfort him; she thought that if she had many such moments in her life she would know that what old women say is true: A woman is happy before she learns to talk and after her tongue has spoken its last words.

"He would never forget," she said, looking at Bergeot.

"He's a better soldier than I am," Bergeot said, laughing. "Never mind, I shan't forget the warning. I'm glad you got leave. Have a good time."

Rienne, who had said nothing, because he knew that Émile would use all his charm on this unimportant pair, moved away. Bergeot shook hands again.

When they were out of hearing, Pierre said,

"If they were all like those two . . ."

"Come," his wife said. She put her arm in his. "We must go. Your mother——"

"We'll stay there ten minutes," he interrupted.

He wanted to take off his uniform, to get rid for a few hours of all that kept him away from her, to walk about naked in the little space between the bed and the old cupboard, and watch her plaiting her hair in front of the glass, keeping an end of ribbon between her teeth, her face quiet and absorbed. Then she would turn to him, with her slight smile.

He marched beside her in silence. While she talked, he was calculating how many steps they would have to take to his mother's house, then ten minutes, then the same number of steps back. Now and then he looked at her.

Chapter 10

"YES, tell the Mayor I'll see him at once," Bergeot said to Lucien.

He stood up with unfeigned care, to shake hands with Georges Labenne. No need to pull himself on to an uncomfortable level of elegance. With Labenne he was back in the air he had breathed as a child, flavoured with tobacco smoke, garlic, beeswax, loud with the shrewd genial voices of his father's friends—small wine-growers, the retired tax-collector, and the schoolmaster and the chemist of the village, who represented the tussle between art and science. Also between reason and faith, since the chemist was an ardent Catholic.

Labenne came across the room with controlled jerky strides, his jacket flew open showing a soiled white shirt, he

rolled his thick lips in a smile charming in spite of decayed teeth, all his gestures gave away the energy he concealed like an animal under his strong skin. Sitting in front of Bergeot's desk, he rested a hand on it : thick black hairs flourished in the yellow flesh, its nails were pencilled in black.

He held out his other hand with a sprig of thin greyish-green leaves on the open palm.

"Look at that. Smell it."

He held it under Bergeot's nose.

"Southernwood," Bergeot said.

"By God, it's rich, isn't it? Did your mother grow it when you were a boy? Mine cherished a bush of it in the yard near the jakes. The right place, eh? I used to pull a sprig and stick it behind my ear when I carried the customers' orders out after school. Y'know, to me the scent of southernwood means summer itself, and winter is a smell of frozen blood off the joints of meat I was handling, and off my own paws. I was eight. Childhood, eh?"

He stretched his eyes, usually half shut. For a moment his face assumed an air of innocence, the more striking because it was drawn from a wide gross mouth, spreading nostrils, eyes twinkling, under coarse black eyebrows, with craft and appetite.

Bergeot felt an impulse to make his own childhood out harder than it had been. It was straitened, yes. In the room stuffed with pieces of furniture, inherited, and resisting the change from a town to a village, he and Bonamy were always under someone's legs. When they became schoolboys, they took their books and ink-bottles into the scullery : Bonamy, who had a horror of blackbeetles, squatted on the copper. Between themselves they talked with an Angevin accent, as he still did when he was surprised. More than the smell of southernwood or garlic, more even than the sight of men arguing over glasses of cloudy yellow wine, it was the accent itself of his childhood. When she was dying his mother had turned back into it, and so it was also the language that the dead of the province talked to each other with their faces against the roots of yews and poplars. . . . He distrusted and envied Labenne, who was enormously wealthy now, but whenever they met, Labenne's voice, rich with the village tones, seduced him into something like affection. He felt at home, and modest — as you must be at home, where even your bed belongs to the family.

"I can't say I regret having been brought up roughly," he said.

"I should hope not," Labenne exclaimed. "Would you rather be us or Monsieur de Thiviers? A man who has never been cold or hungry has one sense missing, the best of the lot. For that matter, Thiviers is flabby, I daresay he's a coward. In any case, he has delusions. People need, he says, to suffer. Isn't that just what would occur to a man who's never sweated his shirt wet and then had it freeze to him?"

Bergeot opened his mouth to defend Thiviers, and closed it. He had stepped into the rôle of hard-headed peasant to put himself on terms with Labenne, and he had not the self-assurance to drop it and risk Labenne's contempt. With a slight discomfort, as though he had over-eaten, he let Thiviers pass as a half-wit.

"Well," Labenne said, "I've looked through the notes you sent me yesterday. I'm bound to say I don't think it's the right time to talk about civil defence. In fact I don't know whether it's any good at all, at any time."

"What do you mean?" Bergeot said. He suppressed his irritation. How like Labenne to reject an idea he hadn't thought of himself.

"Don't you know how little chance the war has of reaching the Loire? Long before the fighting could get as far as here, our generals would have given in. Not to speak of the politicians. . . . Think of it. The Aisne would be gone, the Marne, Paris, the Seine, Picardy, the Ile de France, the Beauce plain. D'you suppose the country could fight with one arm gone? My dear fellow, be sensible. I know all about the soul of a great nation, and the rest of it. But if our line up there breaks, we're lost."

"What nonsense!" Bergeot said. His plan was too dear to him to be given up so easily as he gave up Thiviers.

Labenne threw his arms up in the gesture of a clown.

"And you believe that people in Seuilly will thank you? You don't know them. Like everywhere else, they're sick of the war and they don't want to be reminded about it. It's a sound instinct. Why? Because, without being told, they know that if it goes on it'll end badly. You can't deceive peasants about the weather or small shopkeepers about supplies; they can smell what sort of wind is blowing out of Germany, and they know we can't stand it. My boy, you've

only to ask the midwives ! Ask them how many children they've brought into the world since 1918 ! Ask your old schoolmaster whether he's had to drag the desks closer in front of him, leaving the ones at the back empty. If you took a census now, of everybody except the contractors, you'd find them solid for peace. Every blessed soul." Labenne thrust his lips forward in a grimace. "Do you want us to wait until we're forced, yes, forced to give in ? Are you dreaming about crushing monsters with your bare fist ? Do you want to jump over a cliff to save yourself the trouble of walking home ? I'm right !"

"Your voice reminds me of my father," Bergeot said. "Except that he hated the Germans."

"What the devil has my voice got to do with it ?"

Bergeot did not answer. Impossible to explain the repugnance he felt when he imagined a German giving orders in his village. No doubt the German would be a simple fellow, a villager himself, and would recognise his grandmother's black-seamed hands in the fingers of an old woman scraping grease from a pan. None the less, his heels would cut off the voices rising under the roots ; he would crush, because he was deaf to them, the real memories of the village, those which are its silences, its mute gestures, the way one woman lifts her bread from the oven, frowning and tapping a thimble on the crust, the earth worn to the bone under the centuries-old walnut, the used turf, the way one man crosses his field, pressing lighter on one foot than the other, so that in the darkness a neighbour could say, "There's Buret coming home ; they're all the same, those Burets, they walk like a lamed mule." All these habits, ancient and new in every infant, this metal in the harsh soil, the invader would insult by his ignorance. He would force a silence on chemist and schoolmaster which was not the silence they had inherited, coming from their life before they were born and stretching into their life after they died from the village. The silence would become a real silence, not a fountain of sounds. And after all these hundreds of years the village would cease.

Strange, Bergeot thought ; I shall never go back to Thouédun, and yet I've never left it. He looked quizzically at Labenne.

"I think you're wrong," he said ; "we have to fight. It's not an army fighting an army. It isn't even the word

death against the word *Tod*, or the word Voltaire against the word Goethe. God forbid. It's to save the smile of Voltaire — and, if you like, the smile of Goethe. . . . I don't mind including him."

"Are you sure you're not only anxious about your own career?" Labenne said. He sat up with his sudden charming smile. "Don't be angry with me."

"I daresay I think about it," Bergeot said simply. "Why not?"

Labenne sunk his head and looked up, pious and vulpine.

"Y'know, people say I began my career as a socialist and turned when I made money. The bare truth is I abandoned the socialists because they're either fools or cowards, they daren't fight for power but they hinder the others, the born masters. By God, you won't deny this country needs mastering! What a mess!"

So you dream you can go on climbing! Bergeot thought. He looked at Labenne with curiosity. The other read his thought. His face became vacant, then he laughed.

"Well . . . you insist on your scheme, do you?"

"I do. And I want your full and willing help," Bergeot said.

"You won't get it unwillingly," Labenne answered. He stood up and began to push in the folds of white shirt that had fallen over his belt; the energy of his gestures always pulled it out. He buttoned his jacket, and by some trick of his thick body became the image of a respectable Mayor. He rested his hand on Bergeot's shoulder.

"Don't think," he said in a serious voice, "that because I face facts I'm an egoist. The only time a man can afford illusions is when he's dying. Or a nation."

"France is not dying. . . ."

"Did I say it was? . . . I'll think over your scheme, I'll let you know what I can do. I'll do everything I can. After all, only France matters."

He finished on the trumpet note he used in speeches. Then he pressed Bergeot's hand closely; his smile this time was eager and simple.

Although he had, it seemed, triumphed, Bergeot did not feel content. He was confident that behind his egoism and his slyness Labenne was sound. The sprig of southernwood was there to prove it. Yet he felt depleted — as though he had been pouring his ardour into a bucket full of holes. He

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went over to the window facing north and leaned out, grasping the stone on either side. Reassurance came to him from the stone itself : his hands were the latest in a series adding up to five centuries, beginning with the stonemason's hands.

Chapter . I I

MME DE FREPPEL was at home, expecting her daughter. Catherine had been at school in Paris for four years ; except for the shortest visits, she had not been at home during all that time. Now that she was coming for good, Mme de Freppel had given her a large room instead of the little one where she slept on her visits, and furnished it at more cost than she would ever spend on herself. Looking round it, she felt excited, eager to have her daughter under her roof. She refused to admit another feeling, waiting behind her love and eagerness. It was familiar. It was the feeling that had driven her to send the child to a foster-mother when she was two years old. Until then she had looked after her devotedly ; she did everything, prepared her meals, bathed her. Abruptly, with only the excuse that the child needed a change, she handed her over to the other woman. Why ? Her husband was going to England and she went with him, desperate to be rid of her settled life. The calm she had thanked heaven for when she married Comte de Freppel was making her ill. When they left behind the dull little château near Blois, she felt a burden roll from her. Yet she missed her child, and wept bitterly when she thought about her.

As soon as they went back, she hurried to bring Catherine home. And a year later left her again, with a nurse, when she went to Switzerland for two years : this time the excuse was her husband's health.

Less than a quarter of Catherine's childhood was spent with her mother. She was eight when her mother went off to stay at Seuilly with her friend Mme Vayrac. Mme de Freppel went for one week. At the end of five months she came home only to say she was not coming ; she had had

enough of the Freppel life, the only thing she now wanted from it was her daughter.

M. de Freppel refused. Then began the terrible scenes the child felt without seeing them. She saw her father come out of the library where he had been talking to her mother for three hours. It was her mother's voice she had heard, talking, talking, weeping. A servant who passed the french window said that M. le Comte was backing across the room, his wife clinging to him by her arms, her head fallen back, her body dragging on the floor. After this scene, Mme de Freppel left the house, with her daughter, without any of their clothes — she was afraid he would change his mind. . . .

Looking round her daughter's new room, Mme de Freppel hoped, with a guilty confusion, that Catherine would not make too many demands. The girl must stay at home now. A young woman of seventeen cannot be handed about like a parcel. She opened the cupboards where she had hung dresses for Catherine to try, and looked into the drawers with their piles of underclothes and silk stockings. She had never bought so many things for herself.

She heard the carriage and went down. Catherine was coming into the hall. Hurrying forward, she took the girl in her arms. Catherine was smiling gaily. She kissed her mother, then drew back.

"I'd forgotten what the garden is like," she said.

It was as if she had said, I don't want to answer questions. A child had gone away and a young woman had returned. There would not be any need for her mother to pretend to be interested in boring games, no need to make an excuse for having to go out or go away.

As they went upstairs together, Mme de Freppel was thinking, At last I have her, she's only mine; she's here. She would not admit yet that a friendly young woman is not a daughter. . . . Now that no demands were made on her, why did she hope for them?

"Do you like your room?"

"It's beautiful," the girl said lightly. She walked to the window without looking at anything. "Oh, you can see the river."

"I thought you'd like that," her mother said.

She began to open drawers and cupboards. "I've bought you new things."

Catherine turned round. "That's very kind of you, mother," she said, smiling.

"Come and look at them."

The girl praised everything — as though she knew that her mother, because she had been very anxious to do things well, must be praised. Then she walked about the room a little. Pleased, her mother saw that she was graceful. Charming, too, with dark eyes and a pale skin. Her mouth — with the light emphasis of a signature — was a clear scarlet.

"You must never use a lipstick."

"I don't. But why not?"

"You don't need it."

She drew Catherine in front of the glass. There was a likeness between them — thank heaven, the girl had neither the long Freppel nose nor the Freppel sallowness — but the differences were as clear. All she had never had, or had lost early, of smoothness, freshness, elegance, her daughter had and with it a certain young delicacy, ardent and appealing. Mme de Freppel did not say: She is what I might have been — because it never occurred to her that her life could have been different. She was not willing to exchange a day of her past, not even the most ignominious, against an easier. She had been given as her counters hunger and stratagems — very well, she had not wasted them, and her youth, ah, her youth, had, because of them, a taste sharper than happiness.

"They taught you to walk at the convent," she said.

"We had to practise along a line drawn on the floor," Catherine said, laughing.

"Are you glad to be at home?" No — she had not meant to ask that.

"Of course!"

The Huet woman, Mme de Freppel thought, has no children. An access of pride seized her. It was not what she had expected — to be thankful simply that she had had a child. But it would pass, in place of the impatient tenderness she used to feel when the child was living in the house. Another thought followed it. Catherine would marry. And she must make the right marriage. Her husband must be secure in society, so secure that his mother-in-law would be accepted. . . .

I shall be safe at last, her mind cried. Catherine, with her beauty, her untried youth, her — she admitted it —

gentle friendly indifference, would give her the security she had never had yet. She closed her eyes, opening them to find her daughter watching her with an indulgent smile.

"Before I knew you were coming today, I'd asked two people to lunch. I'm sorry they will be here — but perhaps you'll like them. And I want you to meet people."

Catherine seemed a little vexed. "Why need I meet people? I'd much rather not."

"What are you going to wear?" her mother said.

She began taking the new dresses out of the wardrobe. Catherine came over to her, smiling, and put them back one after the other. She refused to try them on.

"Not now, mother. Tomorrow. I won't do it now. If this dress I'm wearing won't do for your guests I can eat in the kitchen with Sophie — as when I was little. By the way, I hope we still have Sophie?"

"Of course," Mme de Freppel said.

She was afraid to insist. In the past she had always given in to Catherine because in a month or a day or two she would be sending her away; until then the child must be happy. It was too late to begin using her with the authority of a mother. . . . There are other ways of guiding a young girl.

"You look very nice," she said lightly. "Your frock is much too short, but never mind, we'll see about all that tomorrow. Now come down to lunch."

Only one of the guests had arrived. Abbé Garnier was overwhelmingly polite to the young girl. He questioned her in his resounding voice — you could only suppose that his body was hollow — about the convent.

"And what a-ah shall you do? Do you contemplate social service, as it's fashionable to call it now?"

"I shall do war work," Catherine said in a low voice. "I hope I can nurse."

"Admirable, admirable——"

"No, she's too young," Mme de Freppel interrupted.

"But very exacting," Garnier continued, "most exacting. You mustn't let enthusiasm get the better of you. It's never wise. Let me tell you a little story. . . ."

He was interrupted again, by the hurried entrance of Jacques de Saint-Jouin. The young officer apologised effusively for coming late, clasping his hands boisterously with an air of penitence. He dropped it at once when he was

presented to Catherine, and saluted carelessly, smiling into her face as though she and he were already close friends. The young girl gave him a composed smile ; he turned from her at once and talked to his hostess. He went on talking when they were at table, with a confidence and good-humour which Mme de Freppel seemed to find charming. She looked encouragingly at Catherine, who was silent.

"Have you heard the latest?" Saint-Jouin smiled. "I've persuaded Madeleine Souzy to come for my show, and a delicious creature called Esther I-forget-what, a Jewess, of course, I'm told too ravishing, with a voice like a cornrake. I adore women with hoarse voices. Then there's the Spanish pianist, I forget his name too, but he's quite first-class and he'll set off the rubbish. It's going to cost the earth, although they're unpaid. But there are the fares and hotel expenses, and dinner. My mother, who has a head for money — why not, since it was all her money? My maternal grandparent, you know, was a mine-owner, I fancy very grim — I expect you know her, my dear Abbé, she does all the good works imaginable; she gave a ciborium last year to her church, very handsome, I'm told; I didn't happen to see it but I know the trouble she went to to match the garnets. My mother is an admirable woman."

He paused to put food into his mouth. Garnier seized his chance.

"Yes, yes, I know your mother. I knew your father slightly, the late Comte de Saint-Jouin. A very a-ah cultivated man."

"Oh, I shouldn't say he was that," Saint-Jouin said, smiling. "I never saw my father open a book in his life. Once, when someone spoke about Ravel in his hearing, he said, 'I never drank that, what is it? . . .' I do happen to know better than that," he went on modestly; "I had a friend once who was quite a musician; I must say it all bores me rather."

"What do you prefer?" Catherine asked mildly. It was the first time she had spoken.

The young man looked at her with a smile full of admiration. "I expect you're very learned; girls are nowadays. It's disgraceful, but I've always been too fond of riding."

"A healthy sign, if I may say so," Garnier boomed. "We need simplicity in this country. If we had been simpler, stronger, we should not have found ourselves in this

a-ah crisis. Hitler has many faults, no one is more clearly aware of them than I am, but I must admit, we must all admit, he understands how to govern. Don't mistake me, I deplore violence. But, I insist, order is better than disorder. This is a lesson we shall have to learn, and perhaps — who knows? — Herr Hitler himself may be the instrument of our reformation.

"If only," Mme de Freppel exclaimed, "if only we could be done with this war." She turned to the young officer. "Tell me honestly. Do you think we can win? Even then we shall all be ruined. I'm in despair."

Saint-Jouin did not answer immediately. He had been struggling for some time with the piece of chicken on his plate, making shameless efforts to cut away a sheath of gristle. The food was as bad as all Mme de Freppel's meals, but since, when a dish was brought in, she always said, "I had such trouble to get a bird . . ." or it might be — "a sirloin; you have no idea how difficult it is, living so far out of the town: I hope you'll enjoy it," no one dared refuse. Saint-Jouin dropped his knife.

"Despair? I imagine this bird died of it."

"Your habits are those of the mess," Mme de Freppel said smoothly. She turned to the Abbé and began to talk to him about the Bishop. "He seems tired and frailer, the war is telling on him, poor man. . . . Don't you find him much older?"

Catherine was making no attempt to talk to Saint-Jouin. Can she be stupid? her mother thought. . . . No, there was a wilful indifference in the girl's way of looking in front of her, half listening, with a half smile. She was refusing to make an effort. And the young officer, although obviously he admired her, made none, either. Mme de Freppel had never felt before that she was old enough to be Saint-Jouin's mother. Now, suddenly, she felt that the abyss separating her from two of the people at her table was not her experience, not the harshness of her life, not the past, but simply and only her age. . . . With an effort, she went on talking.

Garnier listened to her with an absent smile. He had reached the point of supreme satisfaction and pride he always reached at some moment of his social visits. He came in nervously, suspicious, determined not to be made a fool of. Slowly he became drunk with the sense of his power. He

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knew so much. Resting an elbow on his learning, he talked. And talked. Never without an object. He always saw hovering in front of him the further place he desired to reach — where he would be absolutely safe. There I can be frankly myself, he thought. There I can strike. . . . He suffered — he did not know it — from the duel going on in his soul between the astute peasant and the loyal priest. As a boy, as a young priest, the peasant drove him to respect the energy and solidity of the Church. His superiors recognised in him one of those priest-politicians who can be purified by use. Later, a whole series of false steps put him out of the way of being used. His energy was fretting him to death : he was so thin that the boys in the Abbey choir called him "the Pipe." He did not know this when he listened to the ambiguous purity of their voices, and felt tears coming into his eyes.

The day he heard that the Bishop of Euxerre was dying, he pointed that way all the force of his longing for safety, all the devotion of his insulted spirit. The Prefect, he knew, was a friend of the Minister ; it was without a sense of incongruity that he laid hands on Bergeot's mistress as a useful instrument. He was so sure of his honesty.

He interrupted her without scruple.

"Charming, charming. How well you put it. . . . Now if I may turn to another subject. Not, I flatter myself, unimportant. You know how attached I am to the Morvan. I was born there, the happiest days of my childhood were passed in that country of tenacious peasants. . . . I think it could be impressed on the Minister that I can render a unique service. Special qualifications are not a-ah to be despised in these times."

At first Mme de Freppel had been puzzled. Suddenly she understood. She looked at Garnier with admiration.

"I should like to be in a position to bring together the stabler elements of society in these times," Garnier went on in a mild voice. "You were telling me how much you would enjoy meeting the present Duchesse de Seully. In my obscure position, of course . . . But at Euxerre — you know, don't you ? that the family pays regular visits to their estate near Euxerre — anything I could do, I should be charmed. Charmed. . . ."

She saw that Catherine was smiling at something Saint-Jouin had said to her. Encouraged, the young man made

another remark. His eyes sparkled and he gesticulated with both hands, pressing the tips on his breast.

She turned back to Garnier.

"About the Duchesse de Seuilly. You were saying ? . . ."

Chapter 12

CATHERINE vanished after lunch. She left the dining-room with the others, when they were moving to the garden-room to drink coffee, and the door closed gently, with Catherine on the other side of it. It was her mother's first experience of another of this new daughter's tricks. When you thought you had her, and turned your back for a moment, she was not there. In the past, when she was a child, her mother had had trouble to get rid of her for a moment without hurting her feelings : when she was in the house, the little girl was always under her feet, following her, keeping her at night beside her bed. Never again. The mother would never have this trouble again. Smiling, friendly, the new Catherine stepped aside to avoid her.

She had gone up to her room. Without looking at the new dresses, she went to the window and leaned out. The sun was a little to the other side of the house, and she could open the shutters. A tranquil happiness reached her, coming from the rough grass burned by the sun, from the river, glittering and lifeless in the heat, seen above the alders at the end of the garden. She heard voices coming from the room below, the penetrating sound poured out by Garnier, and Saint-Jouin interrupting it brutally. She listened until her mother began talking, then ignored the sounds. Her happiness did not depend on her mother ; it came from herself and passed between her and the grass and the river. . . . I hope I can stay here, she thought. So many times she had settled herself into a place in her mother's house, only to be sent out of it, and always on the best possible excuse — her health, her schooling. At first she missed her mother, cruelly. Then she had wanted a place where she could be alone. Now all she wanted was not to have to move.

She hoped suddenly that the door of her room would lock. She ran across to it. Yes. There was a key. Locking herself in, she went to kneel in the window with a book she took out of one of her boxes. The unpacking could wait.

After a time she heard her mother's footsteps on the landing. They stopped outside her door.

"Catherine, are you there?"

Creeping silently across the room to the bed, she did not answer. Her mother spoke again, in a louder voice.

"Yes," Catherine said calmly.

There was a brief pause.

"Would you like to come round the garden with me?"

"No, I don't think so, mother," she said gently. "I thought I'd lie down. I'm rather tired."

"Very well."

She heard her mother going away, into her own room, and relaxed without knowing it. She did not know that she had given her mother up. All she had just done was instinctive, the same instinct that at the convent guarded her from making an intimate friend, warned her not to attach herself, not to possess what she might fear losing. She made friends easily, they sought her out, she was charming with them, and once they had gone she never wrote to them, never answered their letters; they were gone, and that was enough to rub them out of her mind.

Late in the afternoon she went downstairs to see whether tea was being served. The door of the library was open. She looked in. A young man was standing with his back to the door, looking closely along the shelves. He turned round, and she recognised him.

The only time she had seen Lucien Sugny before this was humiliating for both of them. He had just been taken on by the Prefect as secretary: in spite of his intellect — or because he had never had time to train anything else — he was shy, awkward, with hands he had only to bring near a piece of valuable china for it to commit suicide. That day he had been sent to the Manor House with a message from Bergeot, and Mme de Freppel offered him tea. He accepted because he did not know how to refuse. Her daughter, a little girl of, he thought, twelve or thirteen, was there. She was crying quietly because she was being sent to school. The car, with her box strapped on, was in the drive. She drank her tea with tears falling over her cheeks into the cup, and

when he looked at her with sympathy she ground her teeth at him in a grimace of hate and loathing. A moment later he dropped his plate, snatched at it, and knocked half the things off the table. The floor round him was hideous with ruin. . . .

He had not recognised her. He blushed, and came forward without breaking anything. Catherine kept an eye on the vase placed on a low bookcase, ready to rush forward. But the young man seemed to have got the better of his hands. Of everything except his habit of turning a brick-red from his collar to the roots of his fair hair.

"I'm waiting here for Madame de Freppel," he stammered.

"My mother," Catherine said. "Shall I find her for you?"

"No thanks, she knows I'm here," Lucien said brusquely.

He had not been deliberately rude, he was simply vexed with himself for blushing. But Catherine was offended. Instead of going away—though why not? she would certainly have left anyone else if he had spoken to her in such a voice—she seated herself at a desk and pretended to have an urgent and difficult letter to write. She lifted her head and frowned, seeing him still stand there uncomfortable and obstinate. Clumsy fool!

She thought of something to say. She kept her glance down, to hide from him her spiteful happiness.

"You're not at the front then?"

"No," Lucien said.

"How did you manage to save yourself?"

There was no answer. She looked up. The young man was pale now, and he was looking at her with distaste. She rejoiced.

"I see no reason why I should explain myself to you," he said at last, quietly. His voice was muted by the hatred she roused in him. It showed itself openly in his eyes; they were still too ingenuous to lie successfully.

"Oh, but do," Catherine said. "It needs some explaining, and I'm sure you enjoy talking about yourself. Or would you rather break something?"

Lucien turned his back on her and walked out of the room. She heard her mother come downstairs and begin talking to him, but she could not hear what they said. She felt angry. So they leave me out of everything, she thought.

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She looked at her letter. She had written : " There is a young man in the room with me, he is tall, very fair, he has large hands and blue eyes, not very large but not small ; I suspect him of being mulish." She tore the sheet up, stuffing the scraps in her pocket to be burned. At school there was a nun who pieced letters together when she found them in the waste-paper baskets. Who knows — perhaps someone here ? . . . Suddenly she emptied the torn pieces on to the desk and marched out, leaving them there.

The young man had gone.

Chapter 13

FROM his room Georges Labenne watched his two children, a boy and a girl, cross the courtyard. The boy, Henry, was short for his twelve years, the girl tall for her fifteen. Her thin body was already rounded and graceful ; this morning her father had noticed the points of her breasts under her thin frock ; he called her to him and kissed her, and at the same time he felt angry, and sad. She was a beautiful creature, dark-eyed and lively, with a narrow face, and thick eyebrows it had not yet occurred to her to spoil by having them plucked. She was clever, too, and naturally elegant : her mother's fine-boned wiriness had joined with the peasant strength of Labenne to form this slender, vigorous young girl.

Labenne had decided already to marry her into an aristocratic family. He despised the old families : their neglect of the State — forced on them by opinion — and their pious devotion to the army were both in his eyes ridiculous. They're impotent, he always said, making a gesture of the rudest contempt. He despised the frivolity of their younger sons, wasting on horses, cars, actresses, the money brought into the family by a careful marriage. Yet he was preparing to marry Cécile to one of these playboys. Why ? . . . Ask the butcher's little boy why, when he was jumping clumsily out of the way of the Duc de Seuilly's car, which covered him with dirt. He burst into the house, shouting, " They've

done for my jacket." "Who?" "They," he repeated, in his stammering fury of a strong helpless child. . . . Labenne knew beforehand that his son-in-law would be useless to him in his ambitions. He was going to found a dynasty, yes — but not from the old families. Cécile, his beloved daughter, was his sacrifice to himself. They would be in his debt, these careless apes, when he had given them Cécile, her money, and her rounded waist and young breasts. Henry would carry on the dynasty. He watched the boy move his broad shoulders in a gesture of self-assurance. Like my father, he thought, with a strong impulse of pride. He saw his father lift the half-carcass of an ox from the ground. Opening the window, he yelled furiously,

"Henry!" The boy turned. "Put your hat on. Do you want a sun-stroke?"

The boy obeyed, showing his white teeth in a laugh. He knew the worth of his father's rage. He ran to his father, not his pretty gentle mother, when he needed comfort. Once, when he fell and cut open his head, his father sat up for three nights, holding him in his arms so that he could sleep without moving the bandages.

Labenne moved from the window. He had seen a car swerve to turn in at the main gates of the courtyard. It would be the guest he expected to lunch. He sat down and began to bore into his ear with his little finger, wiping it afterwards on a piece of blotting-paper.

He jumped up and ran with his heavy feral steps across the room and along the corridor to the landing. Looking cautiously over the stone gallery into the hall, he could see Huet standing there in his usual attitude. The deputy disliked to wait, even for a minute: he would put on an air of abstraction, as though he were sunk in profound thoughts, as though he were indifferent to time, place, and the dwarfs round him. When the usher approached him he started. Seeming to recall where he was, he drawled,

"Yes . . . er, yes. I want to see the Mayor at once. He expects me."

Labenne hurried back to his room.

He sat idly, his thick hands folded on the desk. Ernest Huet came into the room, and advanced, as he always did, close to the wall instead of trusting himself to the open floor. He stretched out his lean arm, smiling, friendly, taking in Labenne and the empty desk in a single clouded glance.

She looked at her letter. She had written : " There is a young man in the room with me, he is tall, very fair, he has large hands and blue eyes, not very large but not small ; I suspect him of being mulish." She tore the sheet up, stuffing the scraps in her pocket to be burned. At school there was a nun who pieced letters together when she found them in the waste-paper baskets. Who knows — perhaps someone here ? . . . Suddenly she emptied the torn pieces on to the desk and marched out, leaving them there.

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"Well, well, my dear Georges, and how are you? You're an extraordinary fellow. You never seem to work."

Labenne smiled slyly. It amused him with Huet to pretend that he was lazy. The deputy himself was tireless: nose down to a purpose, he worked all day and into the night, he telephoned, he wrote letters, drafting and re-drafting them with his own hand; he lunched and dined with useful persons. The pity was, his long flexible nose led him astray. It pointed to all quarters, even backwards. His friends themselves, watching him weave and unravel like Penelope, became suspicious. So many stratagems cancelled one another out, and left him, blown and disappointed, to repair the cracks in his vanity. He was intelligent, industrious, prudent. Yet he suffered from disappointments as other men from colds in the head. Like them, he did not know why.

"I don't work," Labenne said, still smiling. "I lie in the sun and wait for hares to run into my mouth. You'd be fatter, my dear Ernest, if you did the same. But you're a fox, you like running."

Huet smiled absently. If he had his nose to a scent, he could swallow insults without tasting them. Either his skin thickened for the moment, or he became sublime. You can, with human beings, always take your choice of motives.

"You're peaceful here," he murmured. He turned sideways in his armchair, draping one of his long legs over the arm, to seem at his ease.

"Is Paris having a war, then?" Labenne said.

"The proper answer to your sarcasm," Huet said genially, "is yes and no. We are making terrible sacrifices, of course, but so far—thank God—bloodless ones." His nose twitched to one side. "I had a telephone call last night, the moment I arrived, from the Prefecture, asking me to call as soon as I could. Perhaps you know why? . . . But before I say another word, how is Madame Prefect? Still the power in front of the throne?"

Labenne passed his tongue over his upper lip before making a schoolboy's crude joke about Marguerite. He added,

"Other men take a mistress for the fun of it. Or for their health. Our friend Bergeot takes his as—as mother's milk. He's an idiot. One of these days her habits will get him into trouble."

"Her habits?" the deputy said lightly. "This is extraordinarily interesting."

But Labenne never gave away even the most harmless information for pleasure. He waved his hand.

"In a manner of speaking," he said.

Huet pretended to lose interest. His eyes became dull, as though he had turned them lining-outwards to hide the real surface. But he did this, as Labenne knew, whether he had anything to hide or not. It signified nothing — unless that he had received another peremptory message from his nose.

"And what," he drawled, "do you suppose our friend wants to say to me?"

"I can tell you," Labenne said energetically. "I saw him an hour ago. He's full of plans for bringing the war home to us all. Completely fatuous." He jumped up. "Come and have lunch."

He led the way to the dining-room. Their places had been laid at the end of an ancient table of greyish oak. A man-servant brought in the first dish and set it in front of Labenne. It was pike, cooked lavishly in butter. Labenne served his guest, then heaped his own plate and began to cram the fish into his mouth: butter ran over his chin and fell on to his shirt; he had taken his jacket off, dropping it on the floor, where the servant moved it out of his way with his foot.

"Fill your glass," Labenne said. "It's a Coulée de Serrant. You won't get it in Paris, no matter what you pay. It's magnificent, eh? Puts a man on his horse and a woman on her back — and as soft as young grass. Yes, it makes a poet of me."

"It's excellent," Huet said. He was completely indifferent to food or wine. He never ate if he was alone. Meals offered him the excuse he sometimes needed for a conversation. Seeing him come out of Larue's, no one supposed that his air of repletion had anything to do with food.

The servant took away the remnants of the pike and brought in as large a dish of fried chicken. Labenne ate it as his father would have eaten, taking the joints in his hands to tear them apart, and gnawing the edges of the bones with his black strong teeth. He sent his children to the dentist if their teeth showed the least sign of losing their

lustre, but since he was born he had never cleaned his own, except, like an animal, on his food.

The deputy watched him, fascinated : he envied this peasant his absence of false shame. If only I could tear at my food, he thought pensively, I might now be Prime Minister. He had tried every other means : aided millionaires to avoid income tax ; made friends in every walk of life, from provincial journalists to councillors of the Bank of France ; tied knots between himself and every sort of political and financial group. With the unexpected result that at any moment one of them mistrusted him, and undid the efforts on his behalf of all the others. Discouragement overcame him as he watched Labenne swallow two at a time the big glossy strawberries, fill his gullet with wine, and use his nails to work out seeds wedged between his teeth. I lack showmanship, he thought. He felt his ambitions trembling in him, under cover of his sparse flesh. He made an effort to sit upright. I can make use of this coarse fellow, he thought ; he can't get anywhere in Paris without me : and I suppose he wants to go to Paris ; they all do.

" You're not going to go short of food here," he said in a plaintive voice.

Labenne snapped his fingers. Nothing was wasted in his household. He knew to a mouthful what was left on the pike's backbone and the legs of the chicken. If it was not accounted for at supper he would raise Cain. Mistrusting his wife, he did the ordering and paid the bills himself. Everything he had learned in his childhood, seeing his mother count the spoonfuls of coffee and the blades of chives, he remembered and applied : an instinct led him straight to the one drawer among a hundred in the vast kitchen where a servant had hidden a handkerchief of his wife's ; his thick fingers picked it out from the heap of rags without fumbling and held it under the nose of the thief. He never made a mistake. No more than in his investments. Since he placed his first five pounds he had never lost a penny : he saw a failure coming and withdrew his funds months before the firm itself became uneasy. When he was a child he had kept his toys, never more than one or two, under his pillow at night where he could guard them. He never slept now without calling up the list of his investments, sure that any mistake, any danger threaten-

ing one of them, would show itself in the darkness. His broker was resigned to telephone calls in the small hours, so that Labenne could sleep placidly. He slept like a child, with his hand under the pillow.

"Food?" he said. "We have enough to eat, plenty to drink." He pushed his lips forward. "Do you know, Ernest, the only thing I want is to be safe. I'm not, like you, ambitious, nor I don't want any Madame de Freppels in my bed. Security. That's all I ask."

The deputy nodded. He did not believe the other man for an instant. It was not only that he could not imagine a life not tortured by ambition. But to be near Labenne was like putting your hand on the soil of Anjou in summer and scorching it on that hidden energy.

"You're a wise man," he said, sighing. "I admit I'm ambitious. But why not? I know I'm more fit to be in office than anyone in the present Government . . . yes, I include Reynaud! But I've never done better than Under-Secretary for Mines. And it lasted three months—just long enough for a frightful pit disaster, followed by a strike when the troops had to be called out and fired on the strikers. My successor, like the man before me, stayed in office for two years without an incident of any sort."

The sprightliness of his voice pointed to the anguish he felt in his failures. Labenne watched him with an air of sympathy . . . it was almost genuine. But he did not feel moved to tell Huet the truth—that he was too much of an egotist even for politics. All his stratagems—obvious, even when he was most secretive, from the dinner-parties and telephone calls he threw up on all sides—would have been forgiven if he at least pretended they were for a cause. But since they, every one, had to do with getting him into office, they roused malice even in his friends. This was so inevitable that the day he rescued a little girl from the Seine, almost drowning himself, the newspapers reported that he had saved the daughter of the President: no one believed the truth, that she was a little errand-girl, without a vote in her family. . . . What was the use of warning Huet? He never listened to advice. He gave it.

Labenne could not resist a stab. "That affair at Amiens did you no good," he said.

The deputy was silent.

If ever there had been an episode in his career of which

he need not feel ashamed, it was the night of July 27, 1917. That night, visiting Amiens, he heard that a German officer was to be shot as a spy : a pure impulse of pity drove him to see the prisoner and offer, since he had been educated in Marburg and spoke German, to take any message and forward it after the war. He stayed for three hours with the German, talking to him about the country outside Marburg and the opera season. Years after the war a journalist told the story, and accused Huet of treachery. He had only to tell the truth. Instead, he denied everything, he had never visited Amiens, he had never known any German officer. When the truth was forced out of him at last, no one believed it, and he was mortally discredited. . . . He saw the face of the enemy officer. It came between him and Labenne's flat sinister mug. The German smiled politely when he was leaving, the conventional smile of a friend who knows he will see you tomorrow ; he was young, fair, a Catholic. All that hung now against a background of bitterness and disgrace ; he dipped his tongue in the bitterness.

" Since you want to go in for politics, my dear Georges, I warn you beforehand, never do anything quixotic, unless you have witnesses. Even then you'll get a reputation for being a dangerous fellow."

Labenne smiled, with an air of eager simplicity.

" I count modestly on your advice," he said. " I believe we can do a great deal for one another. You have experience, but you know I have a lucky thumb."

He held it out — broad, flattened like a cleaver : he could turn it back in a semicircle. It was also dirty. Huet looked at it down his nose, smiling.

" Since we're allies," he drawled, " I'll tell you frankly " — his nose quivered — " I'm a pessimist about the war. We ought never to have let ourselves in for it. We haven't the money or the men for a long war. We shall become a colony of the United States — or else we shall be defeated. And mark me — if we're going to be defeated, the sooner the better — or we shall be too weak to make terms. . . . I perceive you're shocked, my dear Georges. I'm a realist. I admit it. I never had any use for the illusions of novelists and politicians."

He stopped. Not because he was suddenly ashamed to be lying about himself — at school he had been famous for

the lyricism of his essays ; every age group produced at least one boy who compared German Alsace to Eurydice in hell, and it was he who did it for his class — but because he saw that his careful indiscretion was not having the right effect. He had expected to see Labenne becoming more Thibetan than usual, his slits of eyes and broad nose a mask of amiable cunning. Instead, he saw a mask of reproof.

“ My dear fellow,” Labenne said in a dejected voice, “ I had no idea you were such a defeatist.”

Huet kept a frank smile on his lips, while he shrank into the farthest corner of himself.

“ A defeatist ! ” he cried. “ Oh, no. Far from it, I assure you.”

Still eyeing him, Labenne said gravely,

“ We must build, excuse me for talking like a politician, for the future. As to that, I have my ideas. We must have new men ! No more aristocrats like Thiviers, no fatherly Piriacs mumbling about Joan of Arc. . . . We'll use them. We'll use even Joan of Arc if she can stand up. But what we want is to attract young men from the solid provincial families — ambitious, clever, greedy. They'll push, they'll use their brains for us. We'll find editorships for them, jobs. You — forgive me, my dear fellow, I know it's a mark of your noble nature — you've never had a following. . . . There's nothing noble about me ! I'm going to see to it that we're followed by a school of young energetic grateful hopeful sharks. I have my hand on one now. Do you know him — a young fellow called Derval ? Gabriel Derval.”

“ Never heard of him,” Huet said coldly.

“ You have — without knowing it. He edits our other newspaper, the *New Order*.”

“ Ah ! It attacked me brutally, yes, brutally, during the election.”

Labenne smiled widely. “ It won't next time.”

“ Thanks ! ”

“ Oh, that won't cost me anything. I don't even finance the rag. Another friend of mine does that — he has his own hopes, no doubt.”

Huet opened his mouth to ask the name of this friend, and closed it. He would not ask anything. Let Labenne choke himself with his secrets. He got up to leave.

Labenne took him to the side door of the Town Hall.

You reached it by a long vaulted corridor, and the deputy had the happiness of moving from pillar to pillar, never in the open for more than a second. Labenne stood in the doorway and watched him cruise along the wall of the courtyard. He turned and waved his hand, as limply as an empty glove. Labenne waved back. The same thought crossed both their minds in the same instant, along the same ray of light.

"What a blackguard, though!"

Chapter 14

THE ceremony of unveiling the bust of Foch in the Town Hall Square was more than nine months overdue. People had become used to the pedestal swathed in canvas. Even during the last week when the poles were being hurriedly set up, and flower-boxes fixed to them with off-hand energy by the only workmen in the world who know how to make one nail support a dozen geraniums in their proper amount of earth, no one would have been surprised by another postponement. The first had been due to the lawsuit threatened by a firm of contractors who said they had been employed to do the decorations, now handed over to another firm. It was a promising scandal. Half the citizens of Seuilly knew the exact sum which had passed through official hands from the hands of the triumphant contractor; the other half could trace the line of second cousins linking him to the Mayor. When it was decided simply to postpone the unveiling, "because of the crisis" — as if the crisis had not already lasted six years — everyone guessed there would be no lawsuit. Nor was there.

Now, on May 9, less than a year late, with both firms working overtime together on the decorations, the day of the unveiling arrived. Unless Foch had been stifled by the canvas, he would step out into sunlight, under a dazzling blue sky, to find himself hemmed in by boxes of scarlet geraniums. . . . Possibly he had expected cavalry. . . . A squadron that had welcomed at the station the Minister

arriving from Paris was back in its barracks, and the infantry lining the streets were out of sight behind the crowd of women and children and ageing men which blotted every side of the Square. Only from the sight of this crowd he would have known that in the interval his country had gone to war again.

Standing with General Piriac in the group behind the Minister, General Ligny was talking to Rienne without a movement of his lips. He learned the trick at school, and he kept it up as faithfully as his other childish habits — planting both feet on the floor at once when he got out of bed, in fear of a surprise, choosing lottery numbers in multiples of nine, turning into Latin verse the scraps of conversation he overheard in the street.

“ Good heavens, what a mug the fellow has ! I distrust all Ministers, but to come here wearing a pair of yellow gloves — it’s too low. Don’t you think so ? . . . And look at our deputy. What’s he plotting ? Something against your friend the Prefect, I shouldn’t wonder, he’s watching him so very affectionately. I’ve seen too many lizards waiting about under stones. You should warn your friend. . . . Do you know what Piriac said to me this morning ? He said, I hear that the enemy are very active behind the Dutch frontier ; there’s even some idea they’ll invade on Saturday, but I can’t believe they’re so grossly insensitive. What do you mean ? I asked him. He reproached me for forgetting that Saturday is Joan of Arc’s Day. As if I could forget it, after hearing him rehearse his speech twice ! The urgent question is, Has the Boche forgotten ? ”

The Bishop of Seuilly was standing a little apart. His broad face, the heavy features pinched and blunted, had a polite air of attention. Actually, he was resting. He had learned how to do that while standing upright. Moving his head very slightly he could see a spire of the Abbey Church. By an effort of will that gave him the sense of looking from a great height on the Minister, the generals, and the other little figures, he attached himself to it. From this height they were charming. He could set them on the palm of his hand like Gulliver and watch them move their tiny limbs, insects at the end of a twig. Among them his secretary, Abbé Garnier, whom he could feel palpitating with curiosity.

He was old and tired enough, the Bishop, to have forgotten

the need for moving on from one minute to the next. He would stay in a minute so long that it held for him everything he had ever felt, from his first moment of conscious happiness to the ordeal of a death he could feel close to him, as you feel the nearness of a tree in the darkness by the silence of its leaves. He saw the Minister's lips move. The fellow was still talking ; he had removed the flag that since this morning had covered the bust of Foch in place of the weather-stained canvas, and in a voice directed at the microphone slung between two posts he was admonishing or instructing or chatting to the dead Marshal. . . . Among all these minute creatures, Foch kept his proper height. And, pressed closely together, his lips kept the secret of his thoughts.

Be careful how you move, the Bishop warned him. You could easily crush someone. . . . He felt a sudden gentle envy of the dead. How Foch must have enjoyed stretching his limbs in French earth, after his life. How thankful he must have been to know that these roots he felt near him were sending upwards a life to be caressed by the air of France. There couldn't be a better use, the Bishop thought, for one's body. He looked down at his hands. Let the last energy in them be used, he said.

The Minister was assuring Foch that the young men of France, sons of the young men of 1914-18, honourably deserved his blessing. He paraded them here, all those who were going to die in this war and those who would survive for the unveiling of war monuments. There was something missing in his speech. It limped a little uncomfortably between the speeches he had grown used to making during the last war and the speeches he would make at the end of this. He scarcely knew where to look. At Foch, who had once cut him brutally short when he was addressing a body of aspirant officers ? At certain young men in shabby earth-stained uniforms who were surprised to find him, after more than twenty years, repeating the same sublime phrases with the same modest gestures ? At other young men, like, and yet — because of the memories seeded in them — not like the first ? His gestures became confused. No one, looking at him, would have known whether he was excusing or defending himself, dismissing or summoning the young men he debited to sacrifice, to glory, to the future — to everything except the moment when one of these young men, stretching his arms, smiling, opening his eyes widely to look

at the light, saw nothing and felt only the bitter agony before dark.

Colonel Rienne listened. The poor hypocrite means well, he thought. But what has any of it to do with Foch, who was a soldier, not a politician, who had a direct, not merely a contingent, idea of necessity? And, if he felt any of the things — pride, devotion, pity — that this fellow gives him credit for, kept them to himself. He didn't pity the men he ordered to die. How could he? A surgeon can't pity his instruments. The pity this fellow is emptying on them is a lie. He is pitying himself, like every non-combatant who talks in this way about war. Like them, he can't see that the one decent thing he can do, since he is alive, since he can enjoy the sun, is to hold his tongue. . . .

The Minister made his final gesture to the microphone. The group of notable persons round the pedestal split up as though at the last minute Foch had exploded among them.

The old Bishop went towards his carriage waiting in a side street. He had already — during the reception at the Prefecture — paid his respects to the Minister, who was a Freemason and an atheist.

The Minister waited to let the mob of ordinary people applaud him for a minute before stepping into the Prefect's car. The generals followed. Now the police lowered the ropes, and the mob drifted across the Square to look at Foch. The children stared at him as they would stare at any circus animal, finding in themselves the reason for his aloofness. The women looked at him, some with pity, as though he were an orphan, others with a kind of ravaged despair. Did he know how long this war would go on? Did he believe it would end before Georges, Alfred, Pierre, had been killed on them? . . . Speak! Tell us the truth. Anything is better than not knowing. Than waiting. Than starting awake at night with the certainty that the shock jerking your body has reached you, along that nerve joining your womb to him, from your son. . . . Foch had nothing to tell them.

Almost everyone had left the Square. Two men who had lingered in front of the pedestal turned to go away. One of them had an arm missing, the other an eye. They gave him a last glance.

"He wasn't a bad old bastard."

"As generals go," the other said.

Chapter 15

MME HUET was a devoted wife. The influence of her family and her own fortune had imposed her husband as deputy on the voters of Seully, and she worked loyally to make them enjoy their choice; no honest doctor, lawyer, retired civil servant, however insignificant, could say his wife had been ignored by Mme Deputy: it was said that she kept her husband up at night to rehearse his speeches; some said that was because, bad as they were, she preferred his oratory.

She had let it be known — in good time, to forestall Mme de Freppel — that she would give a reception for the Minister. He had often visited her in Paris, both on her Thursdays, when she gave a formal dinner to diplomats and politicians, followed by a reception, and on her Tuesdays, which were, as she put it, vowed to the spirit. Here you met the famous pianist visiting Paris, the painter most in vogue, writers who had earned their elevation. She blended with these a few Ministers or aspirant Ministers who might be useful to her husband: you could judge his nearness to office if you knew which Minister accepted regularly for Tuesday and which came only when Picasso or Lifar or Jouvét was likely to be there. . . . To reach her house you crossed the Champs de Mars and turned right. The house was strictly anonymous. Nothing in it, neither the excellence of the wines, the elegance of the rooms, Mme Huet's dresses, the conversation, was signed, unless by the date of its purchase. A novelist, probably Morand, had called it the most distinguished waiting-room in France.

The Minister was startled when his car, taking him to the outskirts of Seully, shook him out before a delicious Renaissance château. In the clear dusk he stared up at slender turrets marking off the corners of the two wings, at the dreaming statues between the windows of the first floor, at pillars turned as though between the fingers. Heavens, he thought, how foolish dear Andrée must look inside this — like a cow in the Louvre. But Mme Huet at the head of the superb staircase gave him another shock. She was wearing an eccentric dress of no style, cut so that her body, ludicrous in modern clothes — she had flat wide thighs and

narrow shoulders — was almost seductive. She became impressive and handsome. The Minister realised that he was seeing her for the first time in her own surroundings — a provincial salon in which the loot of centuries was secured by a solid base of new wealth. Glancing at the walls, he saw her long nose and pale blue eyes repeated in the portraits of ancestors. As though to make up for the anonymity of Paris, she signed herself here on every panel and every piece of silver. She even led him to a window and showed him, scratched on the glass, *Andrée 1659*.

"My great-great-grand-aunt," she said.

"Why on earth do you live nine-tenths of the year in Paris?" the Minister said, exasperated. "This is where you ought to live."

"My dear man, I like to be able to use my tongue. I can't put up with the sediment that passes for conversation in a province. Besides — my husband's career is in Paris, and I must help him."

She was not inventing her loyalty. Quite apart from her own wish to be married to an ambassador or a Cabinet Minister, she was attached to her husband by firm strings. They were both egoists, both longed to be conspicuous — Andrée had trances and wrote poetry — and they admired in each other their quite different faults. Huet admired and envied his wife's arrogance — the arrogance of a provincial aristocrat and wretchedly bad poetess. And she praised his subtlety — his enemies called it his vanity and want of principle. It was probably true, as her friends said of her, that whenever she made a dear friend he had to agree that she loved her husband. As indeed she did. They were admirably suited to one another.

"You'll meet our generals this evening," she told the Minister. "I want you particularly to talk to General Woerth. I'm quite certain he has a future."

"My dear Andrée, he's seventy if he's a day!"

"Sixty-four."

"And he's been parked down here. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know." Mme Huet's pale eyes sparkled. She leaned her yellowish-white shoulder towards the Minister. "But has it never occurred to you that they need a man they can trust down here? After all, our reserves are here, south of the Loire. Suppose, just suppose, there were trouble — riots, you know — suppose the socialists made an

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"Yes, yes, I know." *Mme Huet's* pale eyes sparkled. She leaned her yellowish-white shoulder towards the Minister. "But has it never occurred to you that they need a man they can trust down here? After all, our reserves are here, south of the Loire. Suppose, just suppose, there were trouble — riots, you know — suppose the socialists made an

attack on liberty ! We should need someone, with a cool head and the right ideas, to make proper use of the troops down here."

"And has Woerth the right ideas?" the Minister drawled. He knew Woerth very well — but gossip is often useful.

"I can assure you he has ! He detests the Left. And then, he's very sound about the family and discipline and that sort of thing, and he detests Jews."

"My dear good Andrée !"

"Oh, I know, I know — you're going to tell me about all the generous noble Jews you know. You're a politician, my good man. I'm only a patriotic Frenchwoman, and I tell you that the Jews have ruined the country. They'll finish it off if we don't get rid of them. All. I wouldn't spare one. Send them to Madagascar. But of course, keep the money they've made out of us."

To talk to him, she had taken him into an ante-room of the large drawing-room, leaving her husband to greet their guests. Now, with a brutality she would never have been capable of in Paris, she pushed him into the centre of another room, full of people standing like seaweed in the light flooding over them from immense chandeliers. She left him. He made his way through, moving an affable smile to left and right : his eye caught on splinters of ribbon in button-holes, bald or grey heads, middle-aged and half-naked women with innocently used faces : he was ankle-deep in a current of boredom, curiosity, mistrust. He had the feeling he had sometimes when he was driving through the centre of France along deep lanes, without even a farm in sight ; of being smothered under the weight of provincial lives, life on obscure life folding down on him, airless, endless, crushing. With relief he saw Mme de Freppel coming towards him. She had a charming girl with her.

"My daughter. She had hidden herself this morning when I wanted to introduce her to you."

He bowed very slightly over the girl's hand, realising just in time that she would make fun of him afterwards if he kissed it. He wanted to say something that would astonish her by its youthfulness. But the moment he opened his mouth only platitudes came out. He told her she was at the beginning of her life, that she was unfortunate, no, lucky, to be young now, that Paris was not France.

"Why do you live in Paris?" she asked, smiling at him.

"My work is there."

He hoped she was going to say, How wonderful to be guiding the nation now. He knew the response to that. Instead, she smiled and looked past his head, with a polite lack of interest. In despair he turned to her mother.

Mme de Freppel talked to him in her attractive and slightly common voice about Bergeot. She was the only woman in the room whose dress would have passed muster in any capital city, but she was not elegant. She had not that air of wearing under her dress — at most — a strip of satin. She was clever — he had discovered that already, during the reception that morning at the Prefecture, where she made it clear to him that she was the hostess. He suspected that she was greedy and ambitious. She's determined to make her man at least an ambassador, he thought. He began reckoning up the number of Ministers who had been invited to Seuilly during the past year for this function and that. Guided by her, the Prefect was putting his lines out. . . . He admired and disliked her; she was too intelligent, too grasping, too devoted. Her voice when she said, "Monsieur Bergeot is hard-working, and so well-informed," was nearly a purr — and reminded him of those formidable strong-minded cats who live by hunting in granaries.

"We think very highly of him in the Department," he said.

"I'm so glad."

She lowered her voice to talk shrewdly about politics. The Minister listened. All this time he was conscious of the young girl standing quietly, without fidgeting her hands, unmoved, apparently, by inquisitive glances. Her thin body was bent forward in a pretence of listening.

In fact Catherine was thinking about the road between Mme Huet's house and the Manor House, joyous when she suddenly remembered a tree she had overlooked. It was the trick she had thought of to keep at a safe distance any interest strangers felt in her. She was determined not to give away her doubts or her ignorance.

Mme Huet began to come towards them.

"Here comes the crane," Mme de Freppel said, with a smile. She moved quickly away, followed closely by Catherine. That child knows no one, the Minister reflected. He would have felt sorry for her — if she had taken the trouble to smile at him when she left.

Mme Huet introduced him to her sister-in-law, whose arm she caressed as she talked. He was not in the least surprised to see that the Baronne de Chavigny was a Jewess. Tall, bouncing, good-humoured, she dazzled him by the criss-cross of lights from diamonds holding her aigrette, encircling her bosom, her fingers, her bare arms. He felt as though he had run into the headlights of a car.

"I'll leave you and Léa to talk," Mme Huet said. "You must make friends with her. She has the finest collection of Russian ikons in the world and I know you're keen. . . . Tell him about them, Bobo," she said to her sister-in-law, in an affectionate voice.

She walked away to speak to another guest. Her movements, her narrow sloping body fastened to long legs, were very like a crane. The Minister turned to Mme de Chavigny.

"You collect ikons?"

"I simply adore them. . . ."

She talked in a noisy frank voice, pouring out a stream of phrases she must — unless she always gave strangers her views on life, politics, religion — have prepared. They were ordinary enough in all conscience. The trouble is this desire for luxury, this greed for showing-off. Society is rotten. The Church must lead us back to religion. The Jews must go to Madagascar. . . . There was no rancour in her, she repeated words she had heard from people she could not suspect of needing anything of hers; that was all.

Ernest Huet joined them. Léa twitched his tie straight, then trampled across his feet at the sight of Abbé Garnier. She began deafening Garnier with the same good-humoured zest.

Even talking carelessly, in the middle of a crowded room, the deputy looked as though he were conspiring. He spoke in a confidential voice, keeping his pale eyes on the Minister's shoulder. At last he said,

"We can't talk ~~here~~. Come into another room."

He edged his way through the crowd, keeping his guests at a distance by his absent gaze. In the doorway, he turned back a few steps to tell a footman to bring claret and cold chicken to the library. The Minister heard this uneasily. He realised that he was going to be probed and sifted for any grains of influence he might have.

As soon as they were in the library, an immense room, Huet began to walk up and down. He talked with a solemn

enthusiasm for himself which would have embarrassed the Minister if he had been able to take it seriously. It was a relief when he turned to discuss the political situation. But just as boring.

"You know as well as I do," he said, after a sentence lasting a quarter of an hour, "that we can't conceivably win this war——"

"Oh, come," the Minister interrupted lightly.

"My dear fellow, why not give yourself the pleasure of speaking frankly? We're alone. We're not in the corridors of the Chamber. You won't be overheard. . . ."

Except by you, the Minister thought pensively. He was not in the habit of confiding his secrets to a leaky bucket. Huet would not hesitate to betray him if it suited his ends — or simply for pleasure. . . . But the disorder and the frightful enmities in the government — not to speak of the war — made anything possible. Even a triumph for Ernest Huet. The Minister reflected — He is in disgrace now because he and Andrée were ardent friends of the Nazis. It was to their house in Paris that Abetz hurried when he knew he was going to be expelled; Mme Huet tried to save him, only dropping him when she knew how dangerous the effort was. Suppose Huet's discreditable past turned heels over and became a credit? Suppose it were to become a question of making terms with the Germans? One must be prepared for anything during a war — even for defeat. . . .

He looked at the deputy with a friendly smile.

"If I knew anything likely to be useful to you, I would tell you. I like to have your opinion. A mind such as yours . . . I've always had the greatest respect for your courage. . . . But in fact I don't know more about the position than you do."

Disappointed, but believing — he was forced by his vanity to think that people told him the truth — Huet took him back to the drawing-room. There he was seized by Abbé Garnier, who plunged at once into politics. He explained lightly that they did not interest him, they never could — apart from the unwisdom and fatuity of a cleric trying to irrupt into what was not his province — and if at any time, in any line of one of his doctrinal works, he had seemed to touch on the things that were Caesar's it was always and purely inadvertent.

". . . the note I wish to strike, the note of a-a-ah social

reconciliation, is not, perhaps, always easy to strike — it needs forethought, tact, it needs integrity on both sides. If the opportunity is given me, if — let us say — I were called, as it seems within the bounds of possibility I might be, to, let us say, Euxerre . . .”

Warmed by the Minister's look of sympathy, Garnier felt himself very much the adept in influencing statesmen. He began to expound a delicate problem of scholarship ; from that he drifted to printing in Paris in the sixteenth century. His scholarship was genuine. Inflated by his own voice, he did not see the Minister's jaw twitch as he yawned without opening his mouth. In another second, he thought, I shall be asleep. . . .

The heat in the room was becoming unbearable. Communicating doors were folded back at either end of the room ; one eddy set towards the buffet — a set piece of glass, silver, cold dishes, creams, whorls of cherries, strawberries, forced peaches — and a second into the room where the orchestra went on fluting behind flowers arranged in tiers like a village show. The mirrors in the dining-room reflected old gentlemen in the frock-coats which had taken part dutifully in every official function since the last war : the frock-coats ate and chattered ; their wives, leaning forward so that nothing should fall on the bosom of their silk dresses, tried to keep an eye on them for signs of over-excitement and at the same time catch every gesture of the county families who had come to help dear Andrée with “ my fatigue party ”. Some of the important guests were just arriving. Met, at the head of the stairs, by a ground-swell of perfume and smells of food, they had to fight their way between footmen bolting from room to room with trays of glasses, decanters, ice.

General Piriac was seated in a corner of the drawing-room — behind a console covered with dishes he had not touched. He was keeping himself awake by running over in his head the speech he intended to make on Saturday. He had never been able to think of Joan of Arc as a living, let alone a young woman. Invariably when he heard her name, he saw the edge of the copse where, a child, he had picked up a young owl : he was taking it home, overjoyed that at last he would have a companion at night : his guardian met them at the gate, took his friend from him and wrung its neck. During the time it took him to by-

pass this memory, the young peasant-soldier had moved on out of sight, taking with her the suffering and salt of France. He could only speak of her deeds as though they were things that had happened to himself. He might easily begin his speech with — "The day I entered Orléans . . ."

He tried to attend to his hostess. She was sitting beside him and seemed to him to be talking nonsense. In fact, she was. Distracted because the guest she had been expecting the whole evening had not turned up yet, Mme Huet could only just stop herself from jumping up to push aside the people who came between her and the door leading to the landing. She was unable to sit still any longer. She beckoned her sister-in-law, pushed her into a chair next the general and fled. The old general pressed his hand on the table as though he meant to stand up. It was only a polite gesture. When he did stand up, the effort would have to carry him out of the room and downstairs to his car.

"Please don't move," Léa de Chavigny said, "I can see you're tired."

Piriac glanced at her sallow face, stupid and jolly. He had forgotten who she was. But she was obviously a Jewess, and he was faintly surprised when — she must have forgotten to prepare a second subject for this evening — she began about the need for a religion. She was sincere. As sincere as anyone can be who talks without knowing what the words she uses — poverty, thrift, sacrifice — mean.

"There is only one religion," Piriac said in his slow precise voice.

"But of course. But that's what I'm saying. We must bring the Church back into our lives, and into the schools and the professions, don't you know. I'm terribly anxious."

The general was touched. He blinked at her, tilting his heavy body forward and supporting it with his hands on his knees.

"We shall alter all that," he said slowly. "The day when I see a king crowned in Rheims . . . may not be far off. . . . Have patience. . . ."

A young man — but not the young man Mme Huet was expecting — arrived. He stood hesitating in the doorway. This young man had a thin face, which seemed to be made of dark wood boldly and roughly planed; strong dark eyebrows formed two points on his forehead: he kept an engaging smile at the ends of his mouth, ready to bring it

forward when he saw his hostess. She was nowhere to be seen. He was making for the buffet when someone who had followed him up the staircase seized his arm. He jumped round. It was the Mayor.

"I came here to see you," Labenne grumbled. "Why weren't you in your office this morning? My secretary telephoned to you a dozen times. . . . Come into the next room, I want to talk to you."

Without a by-your-leave Labenne pushed through the groups in his way. He made for the far end of the ball-room, near the orchestra. The young man, Gabriel Derval, followed him.

The editor of the *New Order* was well under thirty, he would have been mobilised and sent directly to the front but for the trouble Labenne took to get him exempted for some ill-defined work under the municipal council. He was able to edit his paper and work at a book he was writing — a plan for the regeneration of France. He had never managed to put together a rabbit-hutch or boil a kettle, and he was in debt, but his far too agile brain furnished him with dozens of schemes for saving his country from falling to pieces. He wrote incisively, always ready to give up a principle for the sake of a phrase.

"What is it?" he asked impudently — when they were seated on a couch directly under the music. "I sent you my next week's editorial."

"It must be rewritten."

"Why?"

Like a dancer, Derval was able to pout with the whole of his handsome body; he became nervous and sulky. The trick did not impress Labenne. His eyes, slits between a low forehead and steep flat cheek-bones, turned away after one bored glance. He said nothing, and Derval became tired of his pose and dropped it. He watched the dancers instead. They were almost all young girls; he chose three to look at closely each time they came round — sturdy young women of the type he preferred, rounded, supple, their faces naturally rosy with the exercise, thin muscular legs. Their freshness and immaturity, the air half beckoning, half defiant that they kept without knowing it, gave him acute pleasure — even though they belonged to his past, to garden parties of sisters and cousins in his parents' shabby garden, and not to the grandiose future he had planned for himself.

Perhaps it was just because this past was still alive and warm in him, and the future more than half stifled in its cocoon of schemes, that he enjoyed watching them. They are harmless, his mind warned him, they would never let you down.

"I gather," Labenne said, "that — again — you're short of money."

"It's hardly my fault," Derval exclaimed. "It's a shocking piece of bad faith. . . . Simply to drop me, when I was relying on them . . . it's treacherous and dishonest. So like an Italian."

"You'll have to find another way of adding to your salary," Labenne said placidly.

"I know. In the meantime, it's awkward."

"Listen. It's no use asking old So-and-so. But perhaps I can make it good. Are you prepared to do a little work for me?"

"Of course," Derval said eagerly. "But when haven't I done my best? I owe you so much. I——"

Labenne cut him short.

"This editorial of yours. It's a sickening boost of the Prefect. . . . Yes, yes, I know we've been supporting him and all his works. But I haven't been doing it out of charity, you know. If I've changed my mind about him, I have a good reason. . . . Come, you're not going to tell me you're surprised? You — a man of the world!"

Derval was ashamed of the feeling of discomfort that had seized him.

"You might tell me a little more about it," he said timidly.

Labenne looked at him with a touch of malice. He began speaking in a friendly, gentle voice, with an air of candour.

"You're ambitious. I know it, I approve of it — a young man without ambitions, what earthly good is he? Ah, Gabriel, my boy, you had all the advantages I missed — a good middle-class upbringing, you'll inherit a little money. You're intelligent. It's men like you who ought to be the masters of the future. . . ." He broke off, smiling and rolling his eyes.

Derval frowned in the effort to understand, prepared to believe anything the Mayor told him. He was desperately anxious not to seem ignorant or naïve.

"Your duty, my boy, is to discredit romantics like Mathieu. And our ambitious Prefect. It's a duty to the country. . . . We must be discreet. Discretion, my boy, is half the battle. The other half is timing." Labenne was pleased with this maxim, and stopped to savour it for a moment. "No crude methods, my boy. No attack. Simply insinuate that our excellent, our admirable Prefect, is over-zealous. That makes it easier, eh? Next week we'll warn people against panic measures — and so on and so forth."

He squeezed the young man's arm, smiling into his face with the frankest kindness and good-humour.

Telling Derval to go and amuse himself, the Mayor sat on alone, forming in his gross body a hard ball of contempt: if he could spit it out among all these cautious lives it would explode. Which of these apes knew he was living in a moment as fatal as the one in which a surgeon exposes the heart of his patient? Not one. They were useless.

He caught sight in the next room of the Minister talking to General Woerth. Those two may know, he thought. Swallowing his contempt, he walked through the room, nodding and smiling, and walked down the flamboyantly handsome staircase. He felt like Samson in the house of the Philistines. But he was not blind. . . .

The Minister had been talking to Woerth for several minutes before he decided to speak frankly. With great delicacy, he confessed to Woerth that until the last hour he had opposed the war. Why? Because this was not the moment. He spoke of France in the tone he would use of an invalid who had disobeyed every honest doctor and got into the hands of quacks.

"We may even be defeated," he said; "let's face it."

Woerth did not answer directly. He touched the Minister's elbow to make him look round. Émile Bergeot had just come into the room.

"Invariably he comes late to parties," Woerth said drily. "He wants to give the impression of working hard. An ingenious fellow. He has everyone under his thumb, though not all of them at the same time." He looked the Minister in the eye. "As to what you were saying — you might drop him a hint to keep his fingers out of civil defence. The defence of Seuilly is in our hands. A civilian is a nuisance."

He turned away deliberately as the Prefect came towards

them. The Minister held out both hands with a friendly smile.

"I thought I was going to miss you," he said gaily.

Bergeot was grateful for his warmth. His spirits — he was deathly tired — rose, and he spoke eagerly.

"I had to make up for this morning's holiday," he said. "We're incredibly busy. I want to prepare people psychologically for the danger of air raids. If they're not prepared we shall have panic."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow, nonsense," the Minister said. He laughed and tapped the Prefect's shoulder. "Don't waste your time and money on it. The war won't come here."

Bergeot swallowed his mortification. He began a protest, but a feeling of shame and discouragement seized him and he was silent. He had, he thought, made sure of official approval. To hear that the Minister found him ridiculous and ill-informed dismayed him. He struggled against his sense of disgrace.

"It can't do any harm to be prepared," he said coldly.

The Minister yawned. "Forgive me, my dear Prefect," he said, smiling. "I'm dying of sleep. I really must go."

Propped in the doorway, Mme Huet was looking at her guests with an air of astonished insolence. The Minister approached her to say good-night. Scarcely lowering her voice, she said,

"Aren't they extraordinary?"

"Really? Do you think so?" he said, amused. "Why did you invite so many?"

"They expect it at least once a year. . . . You were asking me why I don't live here. If I were a private person I could. But to have to be civil to these people! Impossible!"

She was over-excited and haggard. The Minister glanced at her with cool curiosity.

"Get rid of them and go to bed."

"Yes, good-night," she said absently, giving him her hand. "Perhaps when I see you again this abominable war will be over."

"I hope so."

Seeing the Minister leave, the other guests began almost to rush away. No one wanted to be the last to walk down the wide staircase and plunge, evading the shabby old major-

domo, into the park and the night — which, besides being perfectly fresh, did not have to get up in the morning. There was a line of cars in the drivé, but many of the guests had to walk to their homes ; these did not like being overtaken and forced to press themselves against a hedge.

A young officer came into the hall through the door opened for Mme Huet's guests to leave. He stared at them with an admirable air of astonishment, as though he could scarcely believe that people were going away already. At the foot of the staircase with her daughter, Mme de Freppel felt vexed and disappointed to see him arrive now — when she was taking Catherine home.

" Did you see who it was ? " she said to Catherine.

" No," the girl said, yawning.

" It was Saint-Jouin . . . the Comte de Saint-Jouin."

Catherine did not answer. Leaning forward, she pressed her head against the window of the car, trying in the darkness to verify the sum she had been doing all evening in her head ; she was surprised — she had such a good memory — to find how much of it she had got wrong.

Saint-Jouin took the stairs three at a time, smiling right and left on departing guests. He found Mme Huet in the empty ballroom. The musicians were crawling out, one after another, through a gap under the lowest rank of flowers — they were the colour of mushrooms coming up in the grass.

As soon as she saw him, she drew him reproachfully into the small ante-room.

" Why have you come at this hour ? "

" My dear Andrée," he said, smiling, " did you really think I could spend an evening with your husband's supporters ? I've only come to see you — my God, how haggard you look ! "

She had too much self-assurance, and she was too well trained to let him see that she suffered. Smiling, she tried to recall one, only one, of those biting and apparently spontaneous witticisms she used in Paris. They had given her her reputation for cleverness. None came to her help. She shrugged her shoulders and said with perfect simplicity,

" I'm forty. How do you expect I can stand up to these appalling evenings ? "

Chapter 16

COLONEL RIENNE left the barracks early that evening. He was going to spend the night with his sister, and he decided to walk the three and a half miles to the village.

Thouédun sleeps on the edge of a hill. Its thirteenth-century ramparts protect it from everything except progress — which would have destroyed it if it had been worth while. At the foot of the hill, the river, the fortunate tributary of the Loire, sleeps still more deeply; even the old mill leaves it be, to choke itself with water reeds and lilies. As he always did, Rienne leaned against the parapet of the bridge to look into this rich gentle field of water. Birds — the trees were full of birds — skimmed the points of the reeds, hurled themselves under the arches of the bridge, with an inconsequence they have been a million years learning. A million years after the last aeroplane has foundered in the last trickle of human blood they will not have learned a single new trick or forgotten any of the regular ones. A superb sun, on a level with the roof of the château, filled all this narrow valley with light and warmth.

Rienne walked slowly up the road. Whenever he came back to this village where he was born, he felt smaller and less real. The few and narrow streets, the ramparts, the old houses, not many of them so high as the ramparts, claimed back everything he had taken from them to fit himself for the world. He had left here so many dreams, so much unnoticed happiness, so many terrible childish griefs, that if he had wanted to be a poet he need only have mobilised them. . . . He was content to come back as a soldier. A soldier, moreover, who would never be well known, never leave on these streets any marks so clear as those he made on them by his footsteps when he was a child.

After all, why wish to be marked off from the generations who made this a French village? French not simply in its walls and their formidable clumsy gates, its fifteenth-century château. But French still more in the roots plunging deeply into its earth, in the dead who never left their descendants' elbows, jogging them when they fell asleep in old beds, when they married neighbours and second cousins in the twelfth-

century parish church, when they used the same words, when they were born in low-ceilinged rooms, when they died. All this death thrusting into them toughened the shabby houses to stand together against the fierce light. They were tougher than the strong columns of the church. They, and not the church, were France's immortality.

A soldier when he set foot on the narrow street at the top of the hill, at the other end of it Rienne was a child, the child of his village. A child, and a million other Frenchmen offering in this same moment the same unseen gesture of respect and love. The warmth of a million summer noons, the stillness of a million nights without clouds, break like a bubble on the surface of France's eternity. . . . Or so Rienne felt at this moment. . . .

The cobblestones of the street scorched his feet. He met the shrewd ironical glance of an old woman sitting outside her house, and felt abashed. As child, as soldier, what did he know that was not better known to this woman's little finger when it touched the wood of chairs or the hard flesh of the earth?

His own house stood outside the village. He spoke of it as a house out of politeness to the cousin who left it to him. It was of brick and timber. It had one room, with a loft in the pointed roof. There were two windows in the room, one beside the door, another facing it in the far wall, beside another door. In four hundred years the house had had time to settle down, but it had kept its air of distrust and innocence.

His sister was standing beside the open doorway, watching for him. He quickened his steps.

Mlle Rienne was fifteen years older than her brother. She was sixty-three. When their mother died she was taken to Arles by a distant relative, who brought her up as a peasant, and without being brutal neglected her and almost starved her. Agathe wrote to her brother once every year, but it never entered her head to complain. She had not seen him since she was a week old, and when he was twenty-five she was still writing to him in the words used by one child to another. That year, for the first time, he came to see her. Perhaps he had expected to find his mother, with the fresh mouth and blue eyes of a miniature he had. He waited in a sitting-room. The door opened. A middle-aged farm-hand came in, stooping, her face blackened by the sun. She spoke

to him awkwardly. "Brother. . . ."

He had only his pay as a lieutenant. He took her away with him, back to Thouédun. A year later, when he inherited his house, he installed her in it. Her love, all these years nursed for an infant, now moved seriously and clumsily, like a peasant making the stations of the Cross, to the young soldier; she never spoke of him as "my brother", but always as "Lieutenant Rienne". And then "Captain Rienne". When he became Colonel she imagined he stood next to Foch.

"Abbé Letourneau is waiting for you," she murmured.

"Where is he, Agathe?" Rienne asked.

"Why, where do you think? He's in the back."

Rienne went into the house. There were rugs on the tiled floor, chests of drawers — he had no idea what was in them; Agathe's clothes would barely fill a drawer. The canopy of the bed was fastened to the beams of the ceiling. He stooped to go through the low door at the other end of the room. Out here in the scrap of ground which went with the house were Agathe's herbs, with a few pinks and larkspur. There was a well, a flowering chestnut — and his friend the vicar of Thouédun. Apart from the bees arguing, there was an immense column of silence, reaching the sky. The Abbé had dropped off to sleep.

Rienne stood quietly looking at him. The priest's heavy body sprawled in his chair, his hands — shaped by generations of peasants to grasp a plough — hung to the ground. He slept as soundly as he used to sleep in the trenches, where he planted himself in sleep every night and had to be dragged up by the roots. In 1914 he had just been made vicar of Thouédun. He was twenty-nine. All the devotion, the hard patience, and the arrogance of his nature, qualities which made him an acceptable priest, served him when he became a lieutenant in an infantry regiment. Rienne was his superior officer for a time. Once, when he had volunteered for a dangerous job, Rienne refused to send him. Letourneau was coldly furious.

"You'll excuse me," he said, "if I point out that none of the other officers is as fitted to do the job as I am."

"I decide that," Rienne said. He smiled. "And what are your special qualifications?"

"Eh? What? Why, I can see in the dark."

It was true.

Rienne recalled this. Letourneau's face when he slept was alert, fully present. He must still be seeing in the dark, Rienne thought. . . . The priest's thick boots were worn-out and covered with dust. He was shabby.

"Wake up," Rienne said.

No answer, and no movement.

"Gontran," Rienne said gently.

He had discovered that his friend's Christian name, which no one used, travelled by a short cut to his brain. There was perhaps a child always awake, always listening and waiting, at the end of the short cut. Letourneau opened his eyes and sat up.

"Oh, it's you."

"Were you expecting someone else?"

Letourneau did not answer. He shook himself, yawned, then said smiling,

"I'm like an old horse, I fall asleep on my feet."

Rienne shrugged his shoulders. It was useless to go on repeating: You work too hard. He brought out a third chair from the house and sat down. They sat for a few minutes in silence in the warm evening. In the room behind them old Agathe went to and fro as quietly as though she were setting snares.

At last Rienne spoke.

"Do you find people hating the war?"

"Peasants hate all wars," the priest said.

"I mean more than that. Are they talking much against this war?"

"You know," Letourneau said drily, "they wouldn't talk to me about it. Not frankly. Not as they talk among themselves."

Rienne looked at him. His friend's face, lined, sun-burned, heavy, was slightly malicious. Vexed, he was going to question Letourneau sharply. Agathe came out, and said in a timid voice.

"Where is Monsieur Mourey? When is he coming?"

"I thought I should find him here," Rienne said.

"We'll wait a few minutes more, Agathe."

She went back into the house. Rienne turned to his friend.

"Do you realise that you yourself have never spoken to me about it frankly?"

"Why should I?" Letourneau said. "You know what

I think. We shall be defeated. . . . It's time now that we paid for the centuries of hating each other. The rich hate and fear the poor, the poor envy and hate the rich. Neither of them believe any longer that they'll be equals in the City of God. Liberal philosophers imagined that if men were fed they would be content to live quietly, without God . . . they're shocked to find that men without God hate one another. But of course they do. It's natural. Love is always love of God. . . . Poor France. . . ."

"So, if you were still twenty-nine," Rienne said drily, "you wouldn't fight?"

"Certainly I would fight," Letourneau said. "We French are fighting for our lives."

"Exactly!"

The priest looked at him soberly. "There aren't enough of us. Forty million of us Frenchmen against sixty-five million Germans. . . . The young women who said, No children, were getting us ready for defeat. They're no more to blame than the others. . . . Just think! Everyday life was pleasanter here than anywhere in the world. It wasn't starved of its nature, it wasn't hurried. I've seen an old woman sit savouring her life like a workman sitting over a glass of wine at the end of his day. . . ."

"We ought to be all the readier to fight."

"You're wrong, Bonamy. Men don't gladly give up a glass of wine . . . or an omelette with herbs in it . . . or an argument in the sun, if they believe it's all they'll ever have. Why should they?"

"For France," Rienne said.

They heard heavy, very heavy, footsteps in the room. Jean Mourey appeared. He threw himself into a chair, and sighed noisily, and smiled.

"Heavens, that's good," he murmured.

"What made you late?" Rienne asked.

"Just as I was dismissing my class, your friend the Prefect turned up. Don't ask me why. He kept me talking for an hour."

Jean Mourey was a schoolmaster in Seuilly. He was short, slight; an air of youth was cancelled on his face by deeply-cut lines of fatigue. In fact, at forty-five he had the nervous sympathies, the exaggeration, of a young man; but he was tired. He had used up during the War, the last war, more than half a lifetime of energy, devotion, happiness.

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Jean Mourey was a schoolmaster in Seully. He was short, slight; an air of youth was cancelled on his face by deeply-cut lines of fatigue. In fact, at forty-five he had the nervous sympathies, the exaggeration, of a young man; but he was tired. He had used up during the War, the last war, more than half a lifetime of energy, devotion, happiness.

He imagined he hated war. It was because he had cared for it too much. The moments when he had seized, out of exhaustion, out of danger, a piercing joy, remained in his mind not as they had been, not as happiness, not as the sudden ecstasy, but as disappointment and loss. They were always there. Always the unseen standard he used to measure his days — which always fell short. And the greater the effort he had made, the heavier his sense of loss. Only simple joys could reach him and pierce his heart, the first days of hot sun, the reveille waking him — he slept near the barracks.

After the war he married, and after a long hesitation — he was afraid of not being able to meet the demands made by an untouched human being. . . . He thought he was a failure as a schoolmaster, and worked himself to death to do well : he was always surprised and moved when a young man wrote from his military school or his university a letter beginning, " Thanks to what you taught me, I . . . "

He allowed himself an hour a night — usually the last — to add a page to the book he was writing, a history of Seuilly. It was, although written in the driest prose, an immense poem. All the tenderness he withheld from himself, and from any woman, he gave to the old streets, the buildings, the bridges over the Loire ; he could not pass an old house without brushing its walls with his fingers ; he knew intimately the past of every building, it split open and showed him under the husk of age and ruin an entirely fresh face, marked lightly by its makers. He talked to these long-dead makers and learned from them secrets they had told no one when they were alive ; he knew why the anonymous sculptor of the twelfth century had given his female angels the features of a young boy ; they were all of them portraits of his dead brother. There were days when not the past only but the future spoke to him, and he saw, in the bodies of young girls passing him in the street, the gestures and smiles of children who would stand where he was standing, looking at the bright Loire, when he had long been dead. Yet he believed his book was a failure. . . . He never spoke of it. . . .

" Jean," Letourneau said, " you walk like a cavalryman. I never heard anyone make so much noise. What do you weigh ? "

" Eight stone," Mourey said.

"They must all be in your feet. Now I, I weigh thirteen, but I walk reasonably——"

"Like a poacher," Mourey said.

Mlle Rienne came to the door and told them that supper was ready. They went indoors. On the scrubbed walnut table were three bowls of soup, bread, two bottles of cheap Vouvray, a round thick goat cheese, a basket of wild strawberries. She seated herself at one end of the table, but only to watch that everything went properly. She would never eat with her brother's guests.

Mourey tasted the soup.

"Mademoiselle Agathe," he said, "you make the finest soup in the world. I was once for two months on the staff of a Division — I was thrown out in the end for not keeping the general happy. . . . We had a famous chef to cook for us, but he never turned us up soups like yours. I swear it."

"It's quite true," Abbé Letourneau murmured.

Agathe reddened with joy.

Three aeroplanes passed over the house, making the spoons and knives rattle. Bold because she had been praised, Agathe said,

"I never used to mind the noise of an aeroplane. Now I can't help thinking that men are being killed."

"Not Frenchmen," Mourey said.

"Thank God."

"If you like," Mourey said. "But in fact we're not at war. I believe we ought to be. I believe we're making a hideous blunder."

He looked at Rienne.

"Yes, I agree with you," Rienne said quietly. "We allowed the Germans to slaughter Poles without sending an aeroplane. Now we're allowing them ample peace to prepare a blow against us. It's wrong."

"It's better than casualty lists," Agathe said. She glanced humbly at the Abbé. Surely he would support her?

Letourneau said gently,

"No, your brother is right. War is always hideous. But defeat — when it means barbarians destroying France — and without our finding the energy to attack them——"

"Do you know why?" Mourey interrupted. He struck the table with his fist. "The rottenness starts at the top. What does a man like Thiviers care about France? What does he know, yes, about France? Less, far less than any

old woman dying in the bed she was born and married in."

"It's not so simple," Rienne said.

Letourneau broke pieces of bread and swallowed them whole. "It's simple and deep enough," he said vigorously. "Ragged starving soldiers will defend a country they trust, but who trusts whom now? The rich have forgotten their duty, the others know they are being cheated. They could demand honest leaders, they could revolt. . . . There aren't enough Frenchmen with faith in God or in France to revolt in time."

"I don't believe that," Rienne said in his quiet voice. "We shall have to pay bitterly for our inaction, but we can pay. In September I saw a soldier of the last war joining up with his son, and the woman watching them as they went was mother and wife. France is a closed circle. The Germans will break in at some point but it won't do them any good. You wait. I don't think it will be long now."

"Have you any news?"

"No. The usual reports from the Dutch frontier."

Mourey cut himself a slice of cheese and pressed it on bread. He ate slowly, feeling the rough smoothness of the goat cheese melt against his tongue. He relaxed. The faces of his friends, the room, the cube of evening sunlight blocking the door, seemed fixed in a moment outside time. I am happy, he thought: time is at an end. He drank a glass of the cloudy Vouvray and took a handful of strawberries. He watched Rienne's long narrow hand resting on the table, fingers at the stem of his glass, and thought: It is really a soldier's hand, or a saint's; I've seen it on a score of tombs; thank God there will always be hands like his in France.

Rienne was looking at his garden. Suddenly he stood up, and carrying his glass he went out. The other two followed him. The garden was filled with a drone of light, like a multitude of bees. Already the sun was behind the trees, throwing them darkly up to cover his retreat, and a pigeon flying above them was weighted with all the warmth of the day. It flew heavily and slowly.

"All the same," Mourey said softly, "we shall hand on to our children only the ruins of a civilisation. Wait until Paris has been dealt with like Warsaw. And Chartres. . . . Oh, well. *Je regrette l'Europe aux anciens parapets. . . .*"

Letourneau moved clumsily in his chair; its bones cracked.

"It might," he growled, "have been possible to refuse to fight. If our society had been Christian . . . we could have gone into the darkness for a time. Into catacombs. There are things that can't be saved by fighting. When our children's great-grandchildren came out, they might have found them intact. . . . But — Christian or not — some men will always fight. Could we have deserted them?"

"You couldn't," Rienne said.

"This — of all wars — was forced on us. We were choosing between it and barbarism. . . . So Chartres may perish — but the faith it sprang from, and the love, will have been saved . . . again . . . and by your son and father and their wife-mother, Bonamy. . . ."

"Do you think so?" Mourey exclaimed. "I wish I could believe that men rise from the dead. Especially the young dead." He looked at his companions, from one to the other. "You're too much alike — you two."

Rienne smiled and shook his head.

"No. To tell you the truth, I hate war," he said.

"Oh, so do I. But if these swine win they'll educate our children — and foul their minds. That's unbearable."

"Every reasonable man," Letourneau said, "Christian or pagan, must hate war."

Rienne shook his head again.

"Neither of you knows war as I do," he said. "I have no other life. I was educated to make war, my life hasn't any separate meaning. It happens I can tell myself that our enemy hates the very things that are more important than my life or a million lives. The Germans hate liberty, they hate the idea of equality and justice. The fact remains — we can't choose our weapons to defend them. Modern weapons are inexcusably hideous. Modern war is inexcusable."

He had spoken in his usual quiet voice. He was not, like Mourey, living between despair and curiosity. His mind was steady on its course, like a compass. But he must have held something back from his surrender of himself. In spite of itself his voice gave him away.

The priest did not look at him. "Tell yourself," he said, "again, what it is the enemy believes. He believes that force rules the world. So he denies all the agony of

civilisation, all the sweat of men's minds. But he goes further. He denies the agony of Christ — he denies love." He turned his head to look at Mourey. "Your dead young men are dying for Christ, who died for all men."

"And what if we're defeated?" Mourey said in a dry voice.

Agathe, who had come out with the half-emptied basket of strawberries, dropped it. The small crimson berries ran over the grass and stones. Mourey made a move to help her to pick them up.

"No, no," she stammered, kneeling, "let be, let be, I can do it."

"If the human spirit goes down into poverty and suffering, and takes love with it," said Letourneau, "it can do as much as was done by a handful of fishermen. Why not?"

"Then why fight?" Mourey said, with bitter energy.

"Nothing for nothing, my dear Jean! We French must fight to the last French boy, to deserve a new life. . . . It's not only France. . . . Though the world isn't anything we care about, we must save the world. . . . Don't be afraid, Christianity won't perish — the only question is what a Christian must do to help. It's easy to die. It's hard to kill."

"Yes," Rienne said. He was silent. "If I were a young officer," he said at last, "I should work a transfer to the Air Force — as a bombing pilot. Since someone must do that job, I'd rather do it myself."

"That's not humility," the priest said, with a quick smile.

"No. I know. But it's not pride. I'm a professional soldier. If things like this must be done I ought to do them."

Mourey looked at him with a smile that was all affection.

"My dear Bonamy," he said warmly, "not a single one of our leaders — ministers, politicians, bankers — would have the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"You're too cynical," Rienne said. "Think of a man like Émile Bergeot. There you have an official — a politician, if you like — who is absolutely incorruptible. He's intelligent, hard-working, brave. I sincerely wish he were head of the Government. You'd soon see a change in France."

Neither of his friends said anything. They didn't contradict him, they let him talk.

The light was going, leaving behind it only deceit and the scent of Agathe's herbs. A cock crowed. A calm warmth rose from the dry earth. Bent strongly above the countryside, the sky loosed one bird, then another, and another, directly at the pike in the mill-pond : distant trees pretended to come nearer : the fields at the other side of the Loire became so smooth and unwrinkled that there was nothing for the eyes to rest on. Rienne closed his ; he felt himself safe between his friends, the schoolmaster and the priest, as between the two arms of the country. They were not even sceptic and saint, because both were poor and devoted. Both were arrogant, humble, quick-witted. He relied on them. They were his war comrades. They were not, like Émile Bergeot, a nerve joining him to his childhood.

His sister had finished her work and come out again. She moved about the little garden, stooping over the patch of herbs and touching the rim of the well with her old woman's thickened hand. Now and then she said something. She was talking about Rienne. He had always been good. No, he never cried. When he spread his hand out, all five fingers apart, it was not like any ordinary hand, it was more a flower.

"What can you be talking about, Agathe?" Rienne said.

"About you when you were a boy," the old woman said calmly.

She had an endless store of memories and anecdotes about his childhood, but they all related to his first week, and she was too simple and truthful to invent others to fill the gap between her last glimpse of him in his foster-mother's arm and her next, when he was a young man of twenty-five. One long day separated the two, filled with events she never troubled to sort out. She had been cold, scorched, hungry, sleepy, her back ached, the ends of her fingers split open, she altered a dress, took the pins out of her hair, noticed that it was dry and losing its colour, smiled, groaned, rubbing her knees, and carried a sprig of thyme to church in the palm of her black gloves.

"He was sitting facing the door when I came in," she said, "and so tall I thought he would strike his head when he stood up."

She went back into the house. Mourey and Letourneau got up to go away. Until they went she could not go to bed. She had fastened the shutters of the room already and it was nearly dark there. Rienne stood in the door to watch them go away together, Mourey marching like a soldier and the priest slouching along beside him. He turned back into the house and took his candle to climb up to the loft where he slept.

"Good-night, Agathe," he said.

"Good-night, sleep well."

He slept as soon as he lay down. When he woke — at four o'clock — he looked out of the loft door, his window. An unusually clear dawn — unusual in that the mist from the river had already vanished, without leaving a mark on a cloudless sky or any other colour except the colour of light — set everything in its proper place; the sounds — a jay chattering, a far-off aeroplane; the sights — housetops, a neighbour's few vines, the roof of the well. Nothing was distorted or diminished: wherever he looked, there was only colour and logic. For once, a day had started off properly, without a hitch. Rienne breathed in the scents of this familiar countryside. Nothing, he thought, can go badly today. He felt a solid assurance of happiness. It came from every side, from the invisible Loire, from the fields and vineyards, and from his newly alert senses. Wakened by his footsteps overhead, Agathe was already making the coffee. He smelled it. How fatuous to talk about defeat, he thought, stretching his arms.

He went down, drank his coffee, and set off to walk to Seuilly. It was almost six when he reached the barracks. A slip of paper was laid on his table. General Ligny wanted to see him at once. He went, and Ligny read out to him the message received an hour since. The general read very slowly. Rienne had time to notice the title of the book Ligny had been reading in bed. It lay face downward on the blanket, open. *Les Voyages de Gulliver*. Where had he been escaping to when the news reached him that the Boches had invaded Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland?

Ligny folded the message neatly and placed it in his book as a mark.

"Are we going to wait until they attack us?" Rienne asked.

"No," Ligny said. He sighed. "I had a presentiment

when I woke this morning that something disagreeable would happen."

"I can't say I had, sir."

"Ah," Ligny said smiling, "you haven't learned to read backwards. Wait till you're my age. By then you won't have anywhere else to look. Have some coffee."

Chapter 17

A WEEK later, on Wednesday evening, Rienne went to the Prefecture. Bergeot was out when he arrived, and his secretary had no idea where he was.

"He's doing everything possible to kill himself," Lucien said. "He starts work at six. He's still at it at midnight, alone in his office. Yesterday, at the Council meeting, he turned giddy and everyone noticed it. He won't let me work after ten. The truth is, I fell asleep one night when he was dictating to me. Next morning I woke lying on the floor, under a rug, with his jacket rolled up under my head. I shall never forgive myself."

Rienne smiled. He saw that the young man's pride had suffered from his failure, and said gently,

"It's so much easier to keep awake at my age. How many nights had you been up?"

"Three," Lucien said. "If I had been a sentry I should have been shot. Shouldn't I?"

"Yes. You don't imagine that the Prefect would rather have had you shot for being human than lend you his jacket? . . . What is he doing?"

"Preparing the town for air raids. You know, not a tenth enough cellars are ready. And arranging to move children and old people, and the hospital — only if things get worse. And all his usual work, of course. He wants the town to be able to stand a siege — so to speak."

"Why not the Mayor——?"

Lucien frowned. "Didn't you know? He's ill. He has sciatica. I may say it hasn't spoiled his appetite. I went there with some papers yesterday, and when I was waiting

outside the room his servant came out with the head, tail and backbone of a salmon. He must have eaten the whole of it, and drunk a couple of bottles of claret. You're not going to tell me he couldn't do a little work!"

Rienne did not answer. He suspected that Labenne had always grudged Bergeot the credit for energy and devotion, and meant to hinder him. If at the same time he did the town harm he would excuse himself by pretending that the Prefect had usurped his place. Labenne was the perfect egoist. He did not even want to be popular. He only wanted power.

"Tell the Prefect I came."

Lucien walked with him into the courtyard. It seemed that the splendour of this spring was going to last for ever. Week after week of cloudless blue, an unflawed warmth resting on the ground like an enamel, on the trees, on the bodies of human beings. These could be excused for thinking that nature was standing aside to avoid getting in the way of events. Rienne looked at the chestnuts, the tarnishing of their flowers seemed the effect of a painter, and at the sky — at nine in the evening almost as tyrannical as at midday.

"Perfect tank weather," he said.

Lucien looked at him and said diffidently,

"According to the wireless, the Boches have crossed the Meuse. Is it serious?"

Rienne did not know what to say to him. He forgot for a moment that Lucien was not a soldier, and saw him, with his smooth brick-red skin and clumsy hands, simply as a young Frenchman, ignorant, obedient, reasonable. Say to him that in a few days, almost in a few hours, he had been separated rudely from his past, from all the Frenchmen, obscure or known to him, of that past — from Molière, Rodin, Foch, as brutally as from the faceless dead of the last war? Rienne thought steadily for a minute about the scene in General Piriac's room this evening. Ligny was there, but not Woerth. He had been ordered to read aloud the message from Paris. He began. The bridges across the Meuse were not destroyed, and German tanks and guns crossed them in column after column. On this side they found a few ill-trained badly-led troops. . . . Piriac stopped him by the same gesture of his hands that he made when he was scattering salt on his food. Did he think the news needed it?

"Hand me over the paper," he said.

He read it to himself, his lips moving slightly, tracing the words with a finger, like a child pretending to read.

"Half Corap's troops weren't even there," he said at last.

"Corap is an idiot," Ligny said.

"You think that," Piriac said coldly, "because in June 1925 he did better than you."

"In 1925?" Ligny said.

"At the exercises."

"Good heavens," Ligny said. "Does that give him the right to open a door into France for all the Boche tanks? Do you realise that the hinges are gone, broken? Do you realise that the Maginot has been turned?"

"The Maginot forts can't be taken," Piriac repeated.

Ligny smiled. It was the nearest expression to anguish Rienne had seen on his face since he knew him.

"The Meuse," Piriac said, "is a difficult river. Hard to defend."

He dragged himself from his chair and went to press a finger, one of his long shaking fingers, on the map. He pressed it between Sedan and Namur, as though he were staunching a wound. Apparently he came to the conclusion that he was doing no good, and turned away. . . . He frowned when he saw that Ligny had picked up the despatch and was reading it.

"What's all this about disguised German officers?" Ligny said.

"Fairy tales," Piriac said sternly. "Bogeys they frighten themselves with in Paris." He turned to Rienne. "You can go."

As Rienne left the room he saw the two generals draw closer together, even in their antagonism able to understand each other better than either would understand a politician or a banker or a man who threw his money about. On General Ligny's face a flicker of irony came to light up the anguish, but the other's was calm, as placid and reserved as though he were at a review: the news had not made an impression on his finely-veined cheeks. . . .

Rienne's silence intimidated young Sugny.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have asked that," he said awkwardly.

"What was it you asked?"

"If things were serious," Lucien repeated.

"Yes, it is serious," Rienne said. He could feel Ligny's smile fixing itself to his face. "But nothing is lost."

He turned to go away. Lucien took a step towards him.

"What is it?" Rienne said. "What do you want?"

"I can't stay on here, sir." The young man had turned a deep red. Obstinacy and mistrust hardened his eyes and made him sullen. He looked what he was, the son of a farmer. "I must be in the army."

Rienne was going to make a discouraging reply. He changed his mind and said,

"Listen to me, Lucien. I promise you, as soon as things are really dangerous, I'll speak to the Prefect and send you myself into the army. Is that good enough?"

He left the young man stammering an absurd phrase, and went into the town. He had not dined. He decided to go and ask Marie to give him soup.

The Quai d'Angers was empty. After he passed the Café Buran there was no sign that people were living in the houses behind the half-shuttered windows. For the first time, as though he were seeing them after a long absence, he noticed their shabbiness, the balconies eaten by rust, the rotten plaster. On his other side, the Loire was implacably new and glittering. The day's heat was flowing into the warmth of the night; a few stars were barely visible, as young as the Loire. Deceived by changes in the sky, a cock began crowing on the island and another answered him from behind the barracks. Farther off in the country, a third. At this rate it would be half an hour before the last of the sentinels was roused, somewhere on the coast.

The café was still open. Two workmen at the back of the room left when Rienne came in, and Marie hurried to lock the door after them. She came back listlessly and quickly.

"Some soup — sorrel? An omelette?"

"Both," Rienne said, "if you will, Marie."

He watched her as she went into the kitchen. She still had her smooth nape and the rounded immature shoulders of her childhood. But she walked like a woman. No child has, even in misery, that heaviness women carry in their bodies, only giving it up when they die. When she came back to his table, carrying the bowl of sorrel soup, Rienne saw that she had been crying like a woman, with dry eyes. She

set down the soup and the bread, and turned to go.

"Never mind the omelette for a minute," Rienne said. "What's the matter?"

Marie looked at him with a hard look; he scarcely knew her.

"You can tell me that, sir. You know what they are up to. You know what's happening up there." She stepped back. In the glass on the wall behind her, above its advertisement of Cinzano, he could see her thin neck, advertisement of youth and docility. "Pierre . . ." she said. She controlled herself. "Excuse me. I know there are others."

"But he's in the Maginot," Rienne said. "He's not in any danger yet."

"Excuse me," Marie said again. "He was at Sedan. His friend Boutreux came home last week on leave, and he told me. They had been moved."

Rienne moved the spoon in his soup absently. No more than to Lucien Sugny could he tell her that something was happening which made everything the country had counted on in the last years, its line of forts, its generals, the suavity and toughness of its culture, no more use against danger. Nothing was left between it and disaster but the bodies of its men, and the bodies of their wives and children, backed against a defence older than the Maginot. It was suppleness now against force, imagination against brute audacity, logic against brute dreams. In his mind he had no doubt of victory. He would not have been a Frenchman if in this moment, as in almost every moment, he had not believed in the immortality of France. In almost every moment . . . even in Rienne's mind there were drifts of scepticism, which he had the firmness to avoid. . . . Can I, he thought, tell her that Pierre, that a million Pierres, are as good as killed? He looked with his terrible directness at the young woman in washed-out print overall. She managed to smile.

"You would always tell the truth," she murmured.

"Your husband has as much chance as the others, my child. And didn't you tell me that his father came home safely in 1918?"

"Do you think these things run in families?" Marie said, with her smile.

"Perhaps."

Marie crossed her arms on her narrow body. "But Pierre is only young."

"So were they."

"True. It's the fatality of wars. Why do we allow them?"

"They happen. And then the country must be defended."

"Evidently," Marie retorted.

She looked at him with a hint of mockery, and hurried away to make his omelette.

Chapter 18

EARLIER in the evening of this day Mme Vayrac was sitting alone in her room — submerged like one of those thick-stemmed aquatic plants, half plant, half animal — under the warmth flowing in from outside. This room faced north, but the heat during these days came from the centre of the sky and turned everything in its claw. Léonie could sit in her thicknesses of flesh for hours, quite placid. Her eyes at this moment were dull. That was because they were showing their reverse side : the other, the living, had been turned to the kaleidoscope of her life. She was sluggishly happy watching it. . . . She was a child in Seully. Her father picked her up and plumped her down on a cask of wine. The wood scratched her bare bottom, and he laughed and sent her indoors. How dark and warm in the kitchen, where their servant was roasting eight partridges before the glowing bars ; drops of juice fell onto the coarse dish and the child licked them off her fingers. . . . The gig with its two wicker sides creaked and bounced along the track, she tumbled, with a voluptuous joy, against her father and another large odorous man : gusts of scent from the vines reached them. "The child's tipsy," her father said ; he put an arm round her. . . . Between its painted shepherdesses the pier-glass gave back the figure of a communicant in her white dress : with her gloved fingers she could feel the points of her breasts ; they ached deliciously, she must either dance or burst into tears. Such a charming round face, and eyes shining with a pure joy. . . .

Mme Vayrac found herself chuckling. "Pure?" she said aloud. "You were a born slut, my girl. What nonsense!"

She spread her hands on her stomach. It was as though fingers plunged into depth on depth of corrupt memory, probing for what? What seed?

Why, after so many years, did I come back here? she asked. She made no effort to answer. A moment had come when the ease and anonymity of her life in Paris bored her. She began asking: What do I want? She moved heavily along the boulevards, asking the shoes in Pinet's. She asked it, smiling at respectable lecherous men, lawyers, old gentlemen from the provinces, stockbrokers. There was no answer. But a day when Paris was at its most exquisite, the sky a flawless blue, the chestnuts touching their yearly ecstasy, the poverty of the poor smothered in light, the Seine young and serene, she put her house in the Avenue de Suffren into the hands of an agent and went back to Seully. Where she was certainly just as bored — this time without the wish to escape. It had never occurred to her yet that she would die, but her body was waiting here contentedly.

Content — except for the amputation of her son. Since he was born she had felt about him as about her hand — which also sometimes did things she failed to check in time. After he was put in prison she began to bleed to death. Any moment as now when she came back to the present, it was to find herself staunching the same wound, which would never heal. With a sort of ferocity, she followed his movements from side to side of his cell, she tried to lick him with her mind, to protect him. She might have been in a cell herself, watching him in an agony of tenderness which hid even from herself a horror. Not that she would recognise it as horror. It was her soul that was horrified at what her body had conceived and brought to its term. She was not in the habit of hearing from her soul.

At this moment Mme de Freppel came in. Mme Vayrac watched her, with a cool curiosity. This cruel coolness was sharpened by affection: in a stranger she would not have noticed the marks of age. But on Marguerite's neck she noted the shadow that would become a knotted tendon. Her eye, a surgeon just touching the skin with his tool, noted a new line between mouth and nose.

"Well, my love?" she said in her rich voice. "Will you have a glass of sherry?"

Mme de Freppel took the glass held out to her, spilling from it in her impatience. She had not made up her face before she came out.

"Have you heard the news?"

"What?" Mme Vayrac asked lazily. "You mean about the Meuse? Yes, I know about it. Well?"

"Léonie, it's the beginning of the end. I feel it. I knew this war was crazier than any other war. Men don't know when to give way. Because they're fools, because war has become a habit. Because those savages of Poles, who ought never to have been allowed their own government, got into trouble. If only I could run away!"

"Where would you run to?"

Mme Vayrac's voice was as indolent as always. It covered a sudden gross contempt for her friend. Léonie's father, the wine-grower, had been so intimate with his vines that lacking rain he would have watered them with drops of his family's and his own blood. His own last of all: he was a sensible man. Somewhere, under the layers of his daughter's loose flesh, a root of this feeling was alive. It forced her to despise Marguerite's panic. Her contempt turned to a simple animal rage: she felt certain, as certain as if she had been there, that Marguerite had not spoken about her son to Bergeot.

"Never mind the Meuse," she said, smiling: "what have you done about Edgar?"

"I talked to Émile," Marguerite said quickly. "He'll do what he can. But it couldn't be more difficult."

Her air of candour provoked Léonie. She knew her friend was lying. At another moment, on any other matter, she would, placidly and cynically, have slipped the false coin into her pocket. Her bitterness was too deep for that. She did not speak. She got up, moving her body with surprising suppleness, went over to a cupboard and took some scraps of papers and letters from it. Then she went to a chair and rummaged under the cushion for more letters. Her feet made no sound on the thick carpet. In its black clothes, against the dark heavy furniture, her bulk heaved and quivered — it was as disturbing as though the surface of a bog had moved. Mme de Freppel was seized with alarm.

"What are you looking for?"

Mme Vayrac did not answer. She thrust her hand to the

back of a drawer and took out a bundle of letters in a rubber band.

"Léonie, what are you doing?"

The other woman did not look round until she had opened and emptied more letters out of a small box. She walked back with a grave air, an air of dignity and indifference. Dropping the heap of letters and papers into Mme de Freppel's lap, she lolled with crossed arms against an end of the couch.

"What is all this?" Mme de Freppel asked.

"Can you tell me," Mme Vayrac said, in a terrible voice, "who is going to give me any grandchildren if my son is left to rot in prison for twenty years?"

But who knew you wanted to have grandchildren? Marguerite thought. She was turning over the papers on her knee. They were all in her writing, many of them had been scribbled on Prefecture notepaper in the little room behind Émile's. There were receipts and I.O.U.s. Opening a letter, she saw that it had to do with a person called Pichon. Who was he? She had forgotten completely: he was a broken-down lawyer, or a magistrate with his own reasons for wanting a favour or a decoration, or simply an adventurer. Threads ran, through Mme Vayrac's hands, to the hands with broken finger-nails of the owners of gambling-tables; money-lenders, bookies, pimps, deputies with the respectable faces of sheep; slippery hands into which a Saint-Jouin in need of money confided the ring he had taken from his mother's dressing-table: Pichon was any of these people, with faces borrowed from stock, or all of them; they had, all, greasy eyeballs, dry secretive lips, the air, even in youth, of ill-health. . . . She had her fingers in one of the springs infecting the country. In vain peasants in the Beauce plant sound grain, in vain men living in the Dordogne valley pray for mild frosty winters to strengthen the vines, in vain Marne, Aube, Seine, Yonne, Loire, Cher, Indre, Creuse, Vienne, open their fan of waters against a French sun. A drop from the infected source is certain sooner or later to reach them and spoil the wine and the bread. Sooner or later, under cover of the delicious French light, the suspect will brush against the healthy, who goes home and taints his own children and makes his wife sterile. . . . A pity, and besides it is true.

Mme de Freppel was able to control her voice.

“ Well, Léonie ? ”

The letter under her hand now had to do with certain pawnshop bonds. It was not a thing she wanted to remember. She felt an impulse to put it in her pocket, but was saved from this folly. Léonie snatched it from her. The violence, and Léonie's shaking hand, had an extraordinary effect on Marguerite. She felt pity, even tenderness. Poor Léonie. How she must have suffered ! Jumping up, she took hold of both the other woman's hands, pressing them against her face.

“ Oh, Léonie, Léonie,” she cried, “ why do you distrust me ? I've never let you down, have I ? If I've had no effect on Émile it's not my fault. I have to do things my own way. I can't drive him. . . . Leave him to me and trust me.”

She kissed Léonie's plump hands. The two of them embraced like children, crying and laughing. Mme de Vayrac stooped to pick up the papers, and took them across the room to the cabinet. She had her back to her friend, but when she was pushing the papers to the back of a drawer, she could see her in a mirror. Marguerite's face had lost its animation ; she looked stupid and sullen.

She came back holding something in her hand — a small fifteenth-century figure, in wood, of a woman. It was not eight inches high. The polished curves of the belly, thighs, cheeks, were so many smiles. It was an embodied smile, all the more entrancing for having outlived dear knows what of terror and death. Really, to look at it you would think that peace and kindness were the rule, and cruelty the exception.

“ I want to give you this,” she said.

“ Oh, no, Léonie, it's worth hundreds ! ”

“ And I want you to have it,” Mme Vayrac smiled. “ You know you like it, and I like giving it to you.”

She spoke in a caressing voice, warm and amused, and cut Marguerite's thanks off quickly by stroking her cheek.

“ And now I'm going to show you something else,” she said. “ Look. Sadinsky brought it yesterday. He wants to sell it.”

She watched Marguerite turning the diamond between her fingers. The greed in the younger woman's eyes did not shock her ; nothing human shocked her ; she enjoyed life so warmly — beginning with the first sip of chocolate in the morning, ending, when she got between the sheets of

her bed, on a groan of comfort — that she had no impulse to judge her fellows. She believed that even ascetics are amusing themselves. Marguerite's passion for diamonds tickled her.

"Do you remember your first diamond?" she said. "Wasn't it a ring that Englishman gave you? You wore it over your glove, you'd seen a rich woman wear hers there, and you thought it was a sign of belonging to the right set, the people who don't know that anything exists in the world outside a dozen hotels, three beaches, and a golf-course."

"This is a fine stone," Mme de Freppel murmured.

"Add it to your collection, my dear."

"How can I possibly afford it!"

But Mme Vayrac had considered that, too. That agile avid spider, her mind, which only existed to join fact to fact, had seen at once the relation between Sadinsky's diamond, her friend, and a certain Schnerb, an accountant, who had been useful to her in the matter of her income tax and was now trying to place himself in the financial department of the Prefecture: if Marguerite were to use her influence — he was not the sort of accountant who questions a necessary item. And Sadinsky would let his diamond go cheap, reasonably cheap, to the friend who introduced him to Mme Huet.

"But that's not easy," Mme de Freppel frowned, with impatience. "I don't know why he's so anxious to know this cow of a woman. I'm told she reads her poems to her friends. Is he a poetry lover?" She stood up. "I must go." She looked at her hat in the glass, then kissed her friend, warmly; their hands lingered on each other's arms. "Don't let him sell his diamond until I've tried to find the money. I'll think about your Schnerb."

She had reached the door. A fatal impulse made her turn back. "Why did you say that about grandchildren? Edgar isn't the sort of man to have a family."

Mme de Vayrac did not answer, except by a glance which gave away no emotion of any kind. Possibly she did not know herself that, in this short sentence, her love for Marguerite had come face to face with its opposite. When the younger woman had gone, she sat still for a few minutes, then walked to the cupboard where she had thrown the letters. She fingered them thoughtfully. There was a lock

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on the drawer, but no key. She tried several of a collection of keys in her handbag until she found one that fitted. Her hand meditated, its thick flesh, used by life, closing round the key to hide its movements.

The telephone rang.

Chapter 19

It was Georges Labenne ringing up to invite himself to dinner.

"Do come. You know Sadinsky's coming?" she said. "Do you want to meet him?"

Labenne's voice broadened. "Certainly I know. Apart from seeing you, and getting a good dinner, that's why I'm coming."

"You shall tell me which you want most," Mme Vayrac said, laughing. "And I want to talk to you."

The atmosphere at the dinner-table was of complete ease. The Germans that morning had crossed the Meuse, but there was not a tremor of discomfort in the room. The nerves joining this house to other houses in France, this province to other French provinces, must have been cut. Labenne sprawled in his chair, and ate voraciously of tomatoes, whole hard-boiled eggs blanketed in cream, followed by salmon, followed by veal with young beans, followed by truffled chicken. He picked his blackened teeth thoroughly before dipping into the bowl of fruit.

Mme Vayrac drank glass for glass with him of her excellent Vouvray; both of them mocked the less unbuttoned Roumanian. Sadinsky was behaving with a formality which would have been ridiculous if it had not been natural to him to sit eating with elbows pressed into his sides. He ate with extreme delicacy. His thighs when he sat down spread out like a woman's and seemed about to burst through the broadcloth of his trousers: a looser garment would have suited him. He held his head up to eat, and looked round him with a smile of friendly condescension, a little mocking. He must have practised it.

Labenne looked at his hostess affectionately. One of her virtues in his eyes was that she enjoyed eating and drinking. He was really fond of her. In the same moment he let his glance move without respect over her shapeless body. What a sow, he thought. Under everything in him, the peasant despised her because she was a loose woman. And yet he admired her cleverness, her knowledge of men, even the tolerance which proved that she had no morals.

The room smelled richly of food, mingled with odours drawn out of curtains and woodwork by the sun coming through the slatted blinds. Labenne cleared a space in front of him on the disordered table so that he could rest both elbows on it.

"You've heard the news?" he said in his deep voice — he had a beautiful voice, low and flexible. "Do you realise what it means? The Maginot has been turned. The Germans are *in*. An army ten times more powerful, better equipped, better trained than our army, is inside our defences. Don't let's delude ourselves. The war is as good as lost."

He paused to grab a handful of blackish-red cherries, biting one after another with his discoloured teeth, and spitting the stone onto his hand.

"For a foreigner — who is also a Jew — the prospect is very uncomfortable," Sadinsky said. He spoke quietly. It was obvious that he was controlling himself.

"You'll be all right," Labenne said brutally. "Roumania has sold out to Germany in good time."

Mme Vayrac looked grave. "Then the war may reach us here?" she said in a soft voice. "Have you seen our Prefect? No. Do you know we've been advised to make a list of the food we have in our houses, and . . ."

"I know all about it," Labenne interrupted. "It's all perfectly fatuous."

"Why?"

"My dear Léonie, a town can only stand the horror of a siege if its citizens are burning with hatred of the enemy, and would in fact rather die than let him put a foot in their houses. You go round Seuilly tomorrow and find out how many respectable men and women — shopkeepers, clerks, lawyers, vine-growers, coopers — would rather lie dead in the ruins of their houses than billet a German officer. You know the answer before you ask."

"Yes, that's true," she said, reflecting.

Labenne was picking his teeth again. "All the same, we don't want our Prefect prancing about the town disturbing people. You never know with our people. Roused to make war, they might shoot the wrong man. I shall take steps."

"What will you do?" Sadinsky asked. A delicate smile, full of his suave Jewish malice, touched his lips.

"Leave it to me," Labenne repeated, with an air of irony. "I wasn't born yesterday."

Mme Vayrac was genuinely distressed. "I can't help thinking of our soldiers — dying up there. In this sunshine."

"Soldiers expect to be killed," Labenne said. He had begun to strip its skin from a banana, cramming the fruit into his throat. "And y'know, it's not important. There's a war, and thousands of men are slaughtered. Millions. You'd expect the factories to be half empty afterwards, shops closed, and so on and so forth. Not a bit of it. The shops are open, other men work the machines, society goes on just the same; in a few months, a few days, you can't see the gaps. People have to eat. . . ."

"But the soldiers who are dying now are being killed in a war you say is hopeless," Sadinsky murmured, with the same delicate and malicious smile. "It seems sad."

Labenne turned on him a look of calm ferocity. "There are forms which have to be observed. Let's say you've decided to make peace. You don't take the cannon-meat into your confidence. If you did, it would stop fighting — and then what sort of terms would you make?"

This speech was followed by silence. Labenne helped himself to more cherries, swallowed them, and wiped his hands. Leaning across the table, he patted Mme Vayrac's arm.

"You look well this evening," he said, smiling.

"You've alarmed me," she said pensively. "If we are defeated — what happens?"

"We shall negotiate in good time. My God, why don't they send *me* to Berlin? I could turn the German General Staff into our best friends."

"What have you to offer them?" Sadinsky enquired.

"A navy — intact. Millions of workmen," Labenne said.

The Jew raised his fine eyebrows. "You would give away your ally?"

"In these crises," Labenne said, "a country has no allies."

Mme Vayrac laughed gently. She had drunk enough to believe that nothing was irreparable, not even her life.

"We three are allies," she said, rolling the words on her lips. "You must let Sadinsky talk to you, Georges. He has a wonderful idea. We want to start a syndicate of people who have a little money to invest. There are millions of them. Added together, they could put millions of francs in our hands. We shall operate on the Bourse. You, my dear good Labenne, will give financial advice in the press — in our favour."

Labenne looked meditatively at the Roumanian. Sadinsky's plump face, mild and fresh-coloured, was that of an adult baby. When he smiled, his tongue touched the corners of his lips slyly. No first glance would detect the wheels and cogs of a subtle mind turning in this mild flesh. But Labenne had been able to watch them, and had discovered that all he knew about making money on the exchanges of Europe was childish and feeble beside Sadinsky's knowledge. Sadinsky was a physician who had only to rest his finger on the patient's wrist to know that in less than a week a fever of spending would break out in Paris, that panic was brewing among the peasants of Macedonia, that the Hungarian wheat harvest was going to fail; every one of these breakdowns would show itself in changes in the money market which he could predict to five decimal points. He had been useful to Labenne already. And Labenne conceived further uses for a man with no recognisable scruples and friends in several capital cities.

"It's not a bad scheme," he said briefly. "I'll give my mind to it presently."

Sadinsky and Mme Vayrac exchanged a glance, which said: He needs time to think what he can get out of it. Labenne noticed this glance and read it correctly.

"And now," Léonie said softly, "I must talk to you about Edgar. When is my poor boy going to be released? After all — it's unjust to keep him in prison without a trial."

"My dear Léonie," Labenne said, "you know perfectly well that justice is one of the pleasant fictions of a democracy. I don't know the truth about Edgar's — mistakes, shall we say? — but it doesn't matter. Who knows the truth about any action? The prosecution, when Edgar comes to trial,

will have made up its mind about him, it will have a plausible version of his act. He himself, and his lawyer, will have another. It will be one version against the other — the same thing happens in any trial. The truth *can't* come out . . . it would mean putting society itself in the witness box, and take a lifetime. No, no, what we've got to do — whether Edgar is guilty or innocent — is to prepare an iron-bound fable . . . capable of standing up to knocks. . . . Don't think I'm neglecting him. But don't ask me to strike without a fair chance of getting my man."

It is in his choice of metaphors that a man, otherwise impenetrable, gives himself away. For one second, as Labenne ended his speech, he was terrifying. Mme Vayrac felt herself ready to faint, her hands trembled.

"I have only one son," she said in a low voice. "I don't want my family to come to an end."

"Good God," Labenne said, "do you think you're the only woman whose future has been cut short this year?"

Léonie could not speak. Ah, she thought, he feels sure of his own survival. He intends to found a dynasty.

She was right.

Chapter 20

PEOPLE said of Bergeot, "He's extraordinarily modest. Anyone can see him. He takes as much trouble with an old farmer as he would with an important deputation." What no one realised was that this was part of his vanity. There was nothing he enjoyed so much as handling people. He played his man like a clever angler, and it was only with one person at a time that he could use all his arts freely. To be with a great many people hampered him. What charmed one would disgust another, or make him suspicious. When no one else is listening, a man will swallow any amount of flattery, and Bergeot flattered almost without meaning to, it had become so much a habit with him.

Whenever he could, he saw people singly; even, when he wanted to talk to the mayors of the communes on a matter affecting all of them, preferring to see them one by one. He

invited a man, gave him an ardent attention, and sent him away convinced that he and he only knew the Prefect's mind, ready out of this feeling to admire the Prefect fervently and do all he asked. It had always worked. Bergeot saw no reason why it should not work now : he sent for this man and that to come and see him, and laid before each his plans for what he had begun to call the civil mobilisation of the Department. Few of them when they arrived were convinced that there was any need to prepare Seuilly to stand air raids or find homes for its children in the villages. One by one, bullying a little, coaxing, playing on this man's fears and that man's vanity, he got each to agree. He had one triumph after another. He was delighted. After an interview when he had won over a man who neither liked nor trusted him, Lucien found him strutting up and down the room, almost crowing.

"I fixed him. Lucien, my boy, he's ours."

It had never occurred to him that none of these men was committed in any eyes but his own. There were no witnesses. Any one of them, in the comforting certainty that only the Prefect knew it had been given, could go back on his promise.

This evening, at nine o'clock, he dismissed his last visitor, seeing him to the door with a hand on his shoulder : the man — he was the doctor who was leading the opposition to Bergeot's plan for the hospital — felt on himself the weight of all Bergeot's trust in him, affection, hopes. Turning in the doorway, he said, "Count on me, Mr. Prefect." He marched off. Lucien passed him in the corridor, and saw that he was frowning in a puzzled way.

"Lucien, my child, I'm going off now," Bergeot said. "You look tired. What time did you go to bed last night?"

"One o'clock, sir," Lucien said happily.

"I know. I left you all those drafts. What in heaven's name should I do without you? Don't let me find you still here when I come back."

He was not going to spend the night with Marguerite ; he had arranged to see Louis Mathieu at the Prefecture between half-past eleven and midnight. The next morning would have done as well, but he wanted Mathieu to know that he worked late.

He told the chauffeur to take the road by the Loire, and to drive slowly. The river was clear and placid, as though

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refusing any part in the life on its banks. Instead of soothing him, it forced him to think about the one thing he had been avoiding all day — the bad news. In this moment of her greatest danger, her rivers themselves were letting France down. There — where the Romans used to try to discourage savages from offering a human sacrifice to the floods — century after century, almost generation after generation, the sacrifices have been offered ; to the Somme, the Aisne, the Marne. This time it might be the Loire. Bergeot closed his eyes. . . . Suppose the Government were to move to the Loire, to Seuilly ? I might become a Minister. Why not ? Why not even Premier ? It's only in times of great danger that the Prime Minister is allowed really to govern : I should be the Clemenceau of our day. . . . The car jolted ; Bergeot opened his eyes. The Loire had retreated behind a thick hedge and a field. What a fool you are, you might be a schoolboy, he thought angrily. Then comforted himself with the adroit idea that he was purely a man of action : any man who wants to prevent his mind from dropping into infancy or idiocy when he is idle has to spend his whole life learning to control it ; he had no time for that, he had to rule.

He had no time either to reflect that this is perhaps why every ruler since the beginning has been a failure. And always will be ? . . . The car turned off the road, through the gates leading to the Manor House. Another car — it must have come by the shorter and worse road from Seuilly — was drawing up at the door at the foot of the tower. It was M. de Thiviers's. He got out, saw Bergeot's car, and waited for him.

" I came here to find you," he said, smiling. He held his hat in his hand ; the breeze from the river ruffled his hair with its three waves.

" Why ? " Bergeot asked.

An irrational suspicion seized him, so strong that it was almost a warning. The next instant it had vanished, swept off by another of his little vanities. It still pleased him when a man like Thiviers showed that he knew about his liaison. It made it seem important. . . . Surely an innocent vanity ?

They went in, and Bergeot led the way to a room on the right, with charming narrow panels and furniture of old walnut. " This is my room," he said fatuously. " I work here when I want peace."

His gesture was that of a bored husband. He looked like a husband, a correct middle-class spouse. But he was saying: We are visiting my mistress together. M. de Thiviers was shocked and offended by this bad taste. In an obscure part of his mind, Bergeot knew he was giving offence. He felt uneasy — but could not save himself. The unceasing effort he made to seem the man of the world, to wear the right clothes, to speak in a ruling-class voice, took its revenge on him: at moments it forced him to obey an impulse to rebel and shock. He obeyed with his eyes shut — and never understood why his words were received badly. Since he had always disowned this mocker, this lewd fellow, he had very little idea what he would say, and none at all of the effect on other people. These outbursts were the worse received always because they came from a man who had seemed correct, safe, polite, too polite, almost insinuating. . . .

“What is the latest news?” Thiviers asked stiffly. “The country is facing a terrible moral crisis.”

His solemn voice and face annoyed Bergeot: he gave way recklessly to temptation.

“We could protect ourselves against a crisis of morality! We need only call on our symbols, all those remarkable idols the rest of the world worships with us — because we insist — Montaigne, Pascal and the others. No nation has ever sold itself and its culture so successfully to the rest of the world. But this, my friend, is a crisis of shells and intelligence. It’s really serious! Our guns, tanks, the General Staff, are all out of date. Perhaps our intellect is, too. We’ve constructed a moral Maginot out of our painters and writers — very impressive, but can we hold it? In any case, we can’t frighten the Germans into submission by quoting Baudelaire to them. Only the English and Americans fall for that now. We really need more tanks — and a few better generals.”

“You can make a joke of it!” Thiviers said coldly.

Bergeot turned adroitly. “No, I’m not being flippant. I’m stunned. But it’s no use wearing sackcloth; nothing is any use except an effort of will. My God, I wish I were in the Government!”

He really believes, Thiviers said to himself, that the one thing needed to save France is to make him Premier. “We need men like you in Paris,” he said politely.

Bergeot was deceived — or he deceived himself. He began with energy to talk about the need to mobilise the whole country, to make it a working model of fraternity and equality. For the time being we could manage without liberty ; no one is free to be safer than anyone else ; or to make profits for an Interest ; war has something to teach peace. But when was France at peace ? Never ; there had never been a time when a peasant of Picardie and the Île de France could look at his children, thinking, It's settled, it won't be their turn to dig trenches on the Marne. There were no innocent words ; all of them, even the name of the smallest village, the name of a cross-roads, could, given the moment, spell terror, hate, death. . . .

Thiviers listened with a fine reserved smile. His eyes — they were paler than usual, a curtain had been drawn across them — noted the signs of the other man's exhaustion, his pallor, the newly-drawn lines of excitement and fatigue below his eyes. He interrupted suddenly, in a drawling voice.

"You know how carefully I look after my workers. They're like children to me. And since I'm childless—" He waited for the gleam of sympathy on Bergeot's face, and in the same equable voice went on, "Many of them were ruined, morally, by the socialist government, and I feel about those poor fellows as though a son had gone wrong. You can believe me."

A little exaggerated, Bergeot thought pityingly. His faint contempt blinded him to Thiviers's hatred of his prodigal sons. He ought to have guessed it from the words Thiviers chose. Of all men, a father has a right to obedience ; if he is defied it is an outrage.

"The police," Thiviers went on sadly, "have arrested another batch of communists in the works. But I swear they didn't catch the ringleaders. The real sinners are in ambush ; they'll seize their chance, and they're more dangerous than what you like to call Interests, my dear Émile. Some of us, you know, have a vested interest in France itself."

He smiled. I've gone too far with him, Bergeot thought. "You've only to point out anyone you suspect," he said swiftly, "I'll deal with him." He scarcely realised what he had promised. Deftly, he picked up what he knew to be another excellent card. "After all, you did everything one man could to prevent the war."

"I did," Thiviers said. He spoke condescendingly and in good faith. "When I look back on it — on my journeys to Berlin, Prague, Brussels — I regret nothing. I played a unique part. My position was unique. I was listened to, not as a rich man, but as a scholar, a fighter for peace."

Bergeot listened with a warm smile. After all, what a solemn good ass, he thought affectionately : absolutely sure of his right to rule, morally unable to rule against his own interests — which he can't help confusing with the interests of society. . . . He was exhilarated by his ferocious cleverness in seeing through this poor Thiviers. I can handle him, he exulted. Émile, my boy, there's no holding you — and when I think where you started !

In fact, even when he started, he had perfectly clearly imagined his coming triumphs : he had always been able to charm people ; always, by a mixture of intellect and instinct, got his own way. The one thing he had never imagined — trivial but quite possibly fatal — was that any number of intelligent young men of the lower middle-class are able to see through the motives of financiers and Secretaries of State ; they flatter themselves that it proves them to be superior. Poor young sinners ! Some of them in the end make very respectable little careers for themselves : the rapacity of human beings is less surprising than their everlasting modesty — most of them are content with so little.

With his gentle smile, Thiviers reached the end of his speech. ". . . there is one consolation. This war may teach us by suffering that we are all members one of another."

"Why not ?" Bergeot said. "We are a good little race. We're vain, but in the end we justify it."

He had been touched by Thiviers's obvious sincerity. He's almost a saint, he thought, with a half smile. But not a leader : the dirty work of a crusade would have to be done by men like me.

Mme de Freppel's voice reached them from the hall. Thiviers stood up quickly. "Do you mind, Émile ? I'd like to speak to Marguerite — about her investments."

Bergeot remembered that Thiviers had transferred his money to the United States for him. To cover up an acute feeling of discomfort, he cried,

"My dear fellow, of course. Would you like to see her here ? I'll clear out."

"What nonsense ! This is your work-room." Thiviers was moving towards the door. He turned round, with an affectionate timid smile. "War or no war, I must look after you two children."

Chapter 21

MME DE FREPPEL crossed the hall in front of him — with that slow springing step she had learned when she had sometimes to walk to the very middle of a café before the people drinking and talking at the tables noticed her. The banker could not have guessed this. He had accepted without question her account of herself as the daughter of a rich shopkeeper, married, too young, to the Comte de Freppel. There is always a gullible or at least a weak place in your Napoleons of finance and industry — or else they would be really dangerous to society and not merely an appalling nuisance.

She was in black, a dress which left her shoulders naked and fitted everywhere else. Thiviers saw, as though he were being reminded of them, her small breasts and ridiculously thin waist ; springing below it, rounded thighs and legs. He felt a sharp pain over his heart : pressing his hand there, he felt his pocket-book and a phial of chlorodyne and opium.

He bent over her stiffly, like a good-tempered elder brother, and kissed her forehead. Marguerite smiled, then turned adroitly so that she was out of reach. She seemed to move by turning the upper half of her body — it was very narrow, and she never wore a corset.

Thiviers moved, for him, quickly. He seized Marguerite's hand and held it while he stroked her arm and across her shoulders to her back.

"You are the only woman I know who has a perfect back and shoulders," he said, smiling. "All the others are misshapen, or a bad colour, or too bony or too plump."

"Thanks," Marguerite said. He showed no signs of releasing her. She made a face. "But do look at that cat," she cried.

Thiviers turned his head. "What ?"

The animal had arched its back and with a delicious sly pleasure was rubbing it across and across the velvet base of a couch.

"You and he are a pair!" she said, laughing.

Displeased and a little shocked, Thiviers let go of her at once. "Really, Marguerite, you startle me sometimes," he said quietly.

"Do I?" she mocked. "Really? You're so sensible and pure." Glancing at his face, she decided that it would be wise to placate him. "There, forgive me, my dear boy, you know I'm never serious unless I'm unhappy — or unless I'm forced to listen while some idiot explains himself to me. Why are men taken in so easily by the faces a woman makes to hide her boredom? It's almost an insult. I will say for you, Robert, that you never tried to improve me, except — do you remember? — the day you read me a chapter from one of your books and I fell asleep."

Her impulse to soothe him had been too feeble; she could not help this small gibe. Thiviers looked at her with a smile before he paid her out for it.

"Dear me," he said gently, "and now I must make you unhappy. I came to talk seriously to you."

"About what?" She knew he was punishing her. She looked at him calmly, afraid.

"Your shares."

Relief and anxiety seized her together. "I'm losing money? You have bad news for me? Tell me at once."

Thiviers felt all an honest man's satisfaction in the discomfiture of a friend. He had produced exactly the effect he wanted, and sooner than he hoped.

"My dear child," he said, "you're not a whit worse off than other people whose income depends on a modest degree of stability in the world. You can be sure I'm doing my best for you, but I can't promise to save you. You must be prepared for losses."

"Oh, this war!" she cried. "Why can't even the Germans see that it's destroying civilisation?"

"It's doing nothing of the kind," Thiviers said sublimely. "The very contrary is true. Nowadays civilisation is in the hands of a few men. None of them are soldiers — they're temporarily hampered by the soldiers, as they would be by an attack of measles or diphtheria. And they won't destroy each other. Cured of their measles, they arrange things.

After 1919 I made room in my aeroplane works, and in other factories I could control, for the money one of my German colleagues was not allowed to invest at home. I call that an admirable effort of practical religion — religion as it can only be practised in our day. Politicians can cherish mediaeval ideas of revenge, too too mediaeval. So can common people and soldiers. A few of us have got beyond this. And we, we are the future, we shall save civilisation."

"So God is a banker, is He?" Marguerite said, with a malicious smile.

"Not as you mean it," M. de Thiviers said placidly. "But let me tell you that it requires a mastery of modern finance, the intelligence to grasp its beautiful but very tortuous design, before one can even begin to put into operation God's intentions for the world. In all humility, I believe I'm doing His work as no priest, however pious, is able to do any longer. You smile — but it's true."

What a frightful hypocrite! Mme de Freppel said to herself. She was unjust — blind. Thiviers was sincere. He believed gratefully that we have emerged at last from the jungle of the nineteenth century, where industrialists lay in wait, plotting each other's bankruptcy and suicide in truly ferocious struggles; we are at last approaching a divine, and divinely predestined concord. A few men are marked before birth to rule and to be rich. The refusal of demagogues, politicians of the Left, writers, evilly-disposed workmen, to admit the existence of this divine plan, filled him with frenzied disgust: their sin was blasphemy. Without remorse, simply because he was upright, and out of a love of order, out of a true father's true piety, he would have beheaded these sinners. Why not? It is a loyal remedy for evil. Any other is quite likely to fail.

"You're forgetting my investments," Mme de Freppel said in a coaxing voice. "What should I do without you, my dear Robert?"

He looked at her, tricked by this voice into forgetting himself. His glance passed from her shoulders, the colour of amber, as suave as if it had been spread on by Ingres, to her eyes. He had long since discovered that they held no more reflection than the eyes of an animal, but they could and did gleam with an extraordinary fixed brightness when she was roused; at the same moment her mouth, very wide, became sensual and malicious; the contrast drew attention

to it, and to a deep furrow joining it to her slender nose ; when she smiled, its ends were turned up like a flourish at the end of a word. Thiviers saw her at this moment as unchaste and desirable. He felt ill, and sat down.

"It's people like you who are ruined by war," he said brutally. "I'm not sure that I can do much." He enjoyed her dismay. "But you and Émile will have enough money to live on, hidden away in the States, if you're content to live carefully. Very few men in Émile's position are so lucky."

This warning, covered by a look of benevolence, reached her through her dismay ; she was clever enough to ignore it, as she would ignore the insolence of the Duchesse de Seuilly if she could once be on visiting terms with her. Only a booby lets you see that he has been hurt by a stroke he cannot return — nor resent safely.

"Émile would never be happy living a dull life," she said plaintively. "And I want him to be happy."

"You're as fond of him as that, are you ?" Thiviers said, smiling.

"Except Catherine, he is the only creature in the world I love."

He was taken aback — by her tone, and cruelly by the tears which filled her eyes and rolled down her cheeks until she checked them with the back of her hand, forcing herself to laugh.

"You love him ?" Thiviers said. He knew he was behaving like an idiot. He turned pale. "Dear me, do you really ?" He felt his smile fixed on his face like a false nose. "How charming !"

"Why are you making fun of me ?" Marguerite said. She knew quite well that he was not doing anything of the kind, but she wanted to soothe his vanity — before it was too late. "You know — everyone knows — what I am to Émile."

"Of course. But — forgive me — ambition had more to do with it than love. Surely ? And you hoped your husband would divorce you, so that you could re-marry. . . ."

"All that is true," she said firmly. "But I know Émile better now than I did four years ago. I know how good he is, how intelligent — and how weak. I know him as well as if I were married to him. I've no illusions. I'm used to him, too, I couldn't live without him."

Thiviers looked at her calmly. "All this is very touch-

ing," he said in a natural voice. "My poor girl, I didn't realise that Émile had turned you into a lower-middle-class housewife, the kind of wife suited to his very ordinary talents. And, if I may so, his background."

Marguerite opened her eyes widely. She was facing the light: he could see the fine yellow lines striping the pupil. They were, for a moment, the eyes of a savage animal. Thiviers could not help a movement of fear which was stronger than his surprise.

"Don't give away your jealousy of Émile," she said ironically. "He has ten times your brain and your vitality — and you know it. And let me tell you, he hasn't an invalid for a wife."

M. de Thiviers did not answer this gibe, so abominable that only an angry woman was capable of it. He stood up and walked about the room for a minute, in silence, his head bent. All at once he found himself before one of the long mirrors separating the windows. Lifting his head, he looked at himself steadily and solemnly, as though asking advice. He looked first at his well-shaped body, no doubt without seeing in it that something soft and womanly which even his friends noticed: he saw — he could not avoid seeing — that his clothes fitted him like a well-cut uniform. They were in fact a uniform — of a dandy, of the provincial aristocrat: his hands, long and bony, were cared for; the skin of his face was fresh and well-coloured; his hair, brushed off his large forehead, was without grey, his man plucked any white hairs when he brushed it. His image must have reassured him. Skin and cloth do not feel an insult, and he was able to deflect it on to them. But Marguerite had behaved abominably to him; he had the right and the duty to reprove her.

Turning round, he said soberly.

"Very well, my dear. But let me warn you that husbands in the kind of family Émile comes from are narrowly respectable. If you want to keep him, you must be careful not to shock him in any way."

"What do you mean?" Mme de Freppel asked coldly.

Thiviers hesitated. It was not easy for him to find words which would compromise neither his dignity nor his moral honesty.

"How can you be sure that everything you do, or have done, would please Émile? But — naturally — you don't tell him everything. Even I — who am only your friend —

I may know certain things about you which our dear Émile doesn't."

"What is it you want me to do for you?" Marguerite asked, with an ironical smile.

"Look after him better," he said coolly. "All this nonsense about preparing for a siege. If only for his own sake you must throw a little cold water on him." His voice changed, he might have been speaking to a defaulting clerk. "How many times must I tell fools that if it comes to fighting on the Loire, the war will have been lost; it would be no use going on? Your intelligent good Émile is one of these fools. When he realises that he has made an ass of himself, he'll feel ashamed. You know him. You know that the more he talks about his schemes the more compromised and deflated he'll be when they collapse."

He had convinced her by this last argument. But she did not allow him to see it. She would not give him that pleasure.

"You may be right," she said drily. "It scarcely seems important."

"Only if your — and his — happiness is important."

She laughed, opening her mouth frankly to show her strong teeth. "You pride yourself on your judgement — and you think you can come between Émile and me. What you must think of yourself!"

Thiviers was silenced again. This time he did not comfort himself by looking in the glass. He looked at her fixedly, with an air of absorbed contemplative lust. She had seen such looks too often not to know that he was seeing her naked. She was amused rather than offended. It was just as well that she could not so easily read the expression in his eyes when he looked at her face. He was noting the lines drawn faintly from her jaw to meet under the point of her chin, and the wrinkled skin of her eyelids — which had once been white and were now turning yellow. He felt a cold malice, and transformed it quickly into pity. Poor Marguerite, he said to himself, she will hate growing old.

"Sweet child," he said kindly.

Stooping over her, he placed a second brotherly kiss between her eyebrows and went away.

He told his chauffeur to take the Loire road. He let both windows down, so that the air from the river would cool him. I must, he told himself, have a fever. His eyes ached, his

teeth were chattering. He seemed to have on his lips every sensation they had drawn from their light touch on her skin. Pressing the back of his hand against them — it was as smooth as her forehead — he set his teeth into it. He was suffering a ridiculous grief. Slowly he became calmer ; by the time he reached his house he was in control of himself and could not remember what had been wrong with him. Had he been ill ?

A servant spoke to him as he was going to his room : his wife was asking whether he had come in. He hesitated, and went to her. If he had neglected even so indirect an appeal from her, his conscience would have kept him sleepless.

Nini was lying down in bed. This had been one of her good days, and she had hoped against hope that her husband would come home to dinner. When at nine o'clock hope had to be abandoned, she still sat up for another hour before giving way to a terrible fatigue. She promised herself that if he came in before eleven she would be able to sleep : if not, she would be forced, as usual, to lie awake, counting minutes until her sense of justice — which was purely domestic, and did not engage her for anything outside her house — let her rouse her maid. It was now a quarter past eleven. When her husband came into the room she turned her head on the pillows, smiling at him, with an ineffable joy.

"How marvellous you've come. I didn't expect you."

Thiviers stood looking down at her. Her body under the quilt was as thick and rigid as the marble woman on the Thiviers mausoleum in the cemetery, the Huguenot cemetery. From the modest frill of her nightgown her neck emerged, brown, strong-looking, marked in places with patches of darker pigment ; her hair was plaited close to her head, and so arranged, with a coquetry which would have been sad if it had not been so innocent, that the dead patches were hidden. He did not ask her how she was ; he knew what her answer would be. She was always, for him, perfectly well ; no, she had no pain, she might be a little tired but that was understandable . . . the war and all that. . . . He knew she was quite indifferent to this war ; she would take an interest in it only if it seemed likely to threaten him : until then, it could be cholera killing off a million Chinese, floods in the United States, or famine in Russia for any mark it made on her tender heart.

"How do you feel ?"

"So happy," she said, smiling.

This word, on her dry lips, fetched tears to his eyes. How could she be happy, with her stiff body, the shape roughly of a log, and jutting bones? She had no idea what happiness was. No one had told her that it springs from having a chest too small for your round thighs and a waist little broader than a child's. She was ignorant, her mind bent in a cramp of piety. She was also brave, pious, an angel of modesty. Her life lay open before him at a single page, all the earlier ones humbly blank.

He saw that she was dying of weariness, and hurried to get through the nightly ritual. Kneeling down, he pulled the knees of his trousers, closed his eyes, and began silently to pray. . . . Mme de Freppel's shoulders were traced on the inside of his eyelids; splinters of light reflected from them pierced his eyes. He took up one of his wife's cold hands and pressed it against his eyelids. The image sheered off at once. And now he prayed God to give him strength to do His will, thanking Him at the same time for making His will so obvious that a mistake was impossible. There have been wars which no sensible banker could object to — just as there are forms of self-indulgence not only necessary but moral: beauty, luxury — even, in certain well-recognised forms, lust — are the engines of society. But this present war, with its threat to order, was a crime, as was Émile Bergeot's liaison with Marguerite — crimes, both of them, against morality and twenty per cent. A feeling of confidence and inner peace descended on him.

Getting carefully to his feet, he stooped over the bed. A last flicker of vivacity moved in Nini's eyes, fixed on him. He quenched it by closing them gently and kissing her forehead between the eyebrows. How harsh and damp her skin was. As soon as he straightened himself, her eyes flew open: reflected in them, the noble spirit he had been sentenced to for her life. He was in the habit of talking to this spirit without reserve, with fewer euphemisms than when he talked to himself.

"That fellow Mathieu," he said simply, "is hinting in the *Journal* at the money I still have in South America. The police will know how to deal with him. In war-time an incitement to disorder is a serious crime."

Chapter 22

MARGUERITE took off her dress and wrapped herself in the shabby dressing-gown she wore when she was preparing for bed. She had two charming dressing-gowns in her wardrobe, but she could not bring herself to wear them. An irresistible habit, the years of waking in dingy furnished rooms, drove her to put on this garment with the dark ring of face cream round the neck. She began to brush her hair. It was black, so unmanageable that when she brushed it the hairs curled back like springs. Émile came into the room. Her mirror faced the door, and she watched him coming towards her: he walked with a slight swagger which sometimes moved her to pity. It was at those times that she thought: He might be defeated.

He took her head between his hands. "What scent do you use on your hair?"

"Nothing."

"When I was eight or nine I used to wonder about Martinique. I knew nothing about it; simply repeating the name excited me. Your hair reminds me of it."

He took her head in both hands and pulled it backward, to kiss her mouth. Still holding her, he looked in the glass at her throat, pressing a hand on it, on the firm arch. She freed herself and turned round.

"I must go back to my Prefecture," he said. "I arranged to see Louis Mathieu there about half-past eleven."

"Why?" She was disappointed. "So you're dressed up for Mathieu?" She pulled out of his pocket the handkerchief folded there. It was finer than any she used herself; he had them sent from Paris by the tailor who made his clothes.

"No, for myself. As usual." He smiled, with a conscious irony. "You know quite well that I like to look the same, and correct, whether I'm in Paris seeing the Minister, or he comes to see me. This is my uniform."

"But the Minister's trousers are quite shapeless——"

"I know. He can afford to wear them. I have my lower-middle-class upbringing to forget, and this helps me." He could not have said this to anyone else; he trusted her

even with his feeble vanities, and even when they were ridiculous.

Marguerite sighed. "I daresay. But the point is, you're going back to work. You'll kill yourself — and for what? Can't Mathieu wait until the morning?"

"No," he said, frowning.

"You needn't go through your part with me," she said, mocking him. "I don't need to be impressed by your iron will."

He pulled her ear. "What did Robert want?" he asked — too carelessly. She had expected the question, and prepared for it. Pretending to hesitate, she moved her fingers nervously across and across the arm of the chair, where he would see them.

"He was talking about our investments."

Bergeot fell into the trap. "No. He was talking about me."

"How did you know?" she murmured. She looked away from him — an image of embarrassment. Long since she had discovered that it is easier to take in an honourable and intelligent man by the crudest acting. It is the only sort which touches his instincts, so much slower and weaker for being worn down by his intellect.

Émile laughed. "By your hands. You give yourself away when you're lying. I know the signs."

"What are they?" she said, smiling.

"Tell me what he said to you. You may as well, I know it already. He doesn't approve of me just now. Come — tell me."

Under his air of indifference, he was anxious, and so mortified that she felt vexed for him. But she went on with her comedy, giving in to him with such exaggerated relief that it would not have taken in a child.

"Very well — since you know. He is afraid you'll do yourself harm with the Government — with important people. He didn't tell you — because you're always sceptical — but he has it on the highest authority that, whatever happens, there won't be any fighting down here, on the Loire. The Government is anxious to avoid frightening people, and he thinks——"

"That I have the wind up," Émile interrupted.

"No, oh, no. He admires you so much."

Suddenly Émile laughed, his good coarse country laugh.

"It's all nonsense. Bankers are always nervous. Besides, Thiviers is an old man. He's finished. All these rich men who do nothing for the country are finished. It's men like me who are going to run France after this war. Yes, look at me. I — your good clever little Émile — I am the coming man; not Robert de Thiviers. Don't you know what I'm doing? I'm going to give the rest of the country a lesson in energy and goodwill. You wait. I have old Piriac in my pocket, I always had and he hasn't slipped out. Just think what he leaves to me — in war-time! I believe he would agree to arm my volunteers, if I insisted. My child, you're going to see France finding itself here — *ce monument unique au monde*, as Bonamy says. I mean, as Péguy said. Do you think I don't know what I'm talking about?"

He was speaking with all the force of his magnificent energy, yet he was laughing. He was a great man at this moment. Marguerite had seen too many men of the genus Great Man, and at moments when their greatness should have shown itself in spite of circumstances, not to be able to recognise the true germ when she saw it. She listened with as much grief and pride as the mother who listens to her son boasting about what he is going to do, knowing that he is brave and intelligent as clearly as she knows that life usually, always, disappoints. It can play dreadful tricks, too. Émile was vain, but he was not a fool, not conceited. No difference is so marked as the difference between vanity and conceit. He was vain and humble; he criticised himself; his mind was never content with anything it had finished. Rienne had said to her: Émile is sometimes a genius and sometimes a weak ass; he is always lovable, and one can always respect him. . . . God in heaven, she prayed, don't let him be disappointed.

"How fond you are of Seuilly," she said in an ironical voice.

"Of course I am," he laughed. "I'm the cleverest man here. In Paris I shall have to fight men who are much cleverer, with more experience. Besides, you can't walk for ten minutes here without seeing the Loire. I shouldn't have the same feeling for the Seine, it's too urban. Too urbane. I shall always be a provincial in Paris, always looking round for some shabby square to remind me of Seuilly. But if I never get to Paris, if I have to give up all idea of showing what I can do — I shall shoot myself. I couldn't bear it."

"But you won't have failed — even if you never leave Seuilly," she said anxiously.

"In my own eyes I shall."

"What nonsense!"

"I'm not going to fail," he said, smiling.

He looked at her with a calm gaiety. She was startled into admiring him without any of the pity which would have spoiled it. Everything that belonged to her past life, its recklessness, its optimism of the young woman whose talents and body are both marketable, responded.

"Of course you'll succeed," she cried.

"I know."

"You'll get into the Government, you'll be Home Secretary, then Foreign Secretary, then Premier. A duchess with a long nose and chin will fall in love with you, her husband will die, you'll marry her, thinking of your future. I shall go on working for you, of course; you'll come and see me and tell me political secrets. And suddenly one year we shall both be old, looking at each other in my room, and asking, Do you remember that last autumn in Seuilly? . . . And how bored I shall be without you, my love."

"Don't talk nonsense. As if I could put up with any ordinary woman, after you."

"I've made you happy?"

"Completely."

"In spite of my bad temper?"

He freed himself from her. "I must go."

She tried to keep him. "When do you find time to read — who was it? — Péguy?"

"I don't. Bonamy does that for both of us. . . . Let me go. . . . Good-night, my puppy, my love. Sleep well."

As soon as she was alone, she tumbled from excitement into an icy panic. Her mind, when she lay down, would not let her sleep. Thiviers's warnings were stepping on all her nerves like a gramophone record repeated endlessly. She began planning, feverishly, to turn everything she possessed into diamonds, which she could carry about with her. But she might be robbed. . . . She was walking along a road; people, indistinct but menacing, came round her; they were going to strip her, perhaps hurt her. . . . She woke suddenly, feeling her heart beating in her wrists, her knees, her stomach. She was suffocating. Her hand touched a cool part of the

sheet. Jumping out of bed, she threw off her nightgown, and, naked, went through all the exercises she had felt too anxious to do before she went to bed : if you are going to be ruined, murdered, robbed, it scarcely matters whether you can fold your legs round your neck. Crimson in the face, she stood on her hands just long enough to be sure that she could still do it, then dropped into bed and fell asleep at once.

Chapter 23

HIS secretary warned Bergeot that M. Mathieu had arrived and was waiting for him in his room.

"You locked all the drawers?" Bergeot said.

Lucien Sugny stared. "I always do, when you leave."

"Monsieur Mathieu is a journalist, after all," Bergeot said. He was ashamed of it, but he could not resist the insult.

The door of his room was half open. Glancing in, he saw Mathieu seated in a chair pushed against the wall, upright, as if his head were nailed there. He looked ill. But then he had always this rigidity and pallor, as though he were walking about crucified on an invisible cross that left his arms free. He had the toughness of wood, his air of delicacy was a fraud. He is nailed to his own spine, the Prefect thought. He wondered whether Mathieu's toughness was French or Jewish — in the first case it would be a question of will and bone, in the other of nerves.

The editor turned his head slightly and saw Bergeot in the doorway. For a moment, and before Mathieu's lips parted, Bergeot saw in him the schoolboy who had proved his contempt for the others — when they tried to humiliate him by forcing him to walk on the very edge of the Loire — by jumping in. It was a January afternoon, and almost dark. The water was colder and far more dangerous than ice. Horrified, they watched him being forced downstream to one of the islands. Some of them set off running towards a small boat fastened under the embankment; he saw them, turned his back, and plunged in again to swim to the other

bank. He reached it cruelly exhausted, but he walked home without looking at them when they caught up with him. How wretched we felt and how we hated him, Bergeot remembered. What is it he wants to prove this time?

"Good of you to come at this time of night," he said.

"It's nothing," Mathieu said. "I don't go to bed before two."

The Prefect felt irritated. He's proving that he needs less sleep than other people, he said to himself. He sat down, facing Mathieu, who had not moved. No doubt discomfort and rigidity were part of the evidence.

"I won't keep you longer than I need. I wanted to ask you — you ought to be in a position to judge — what people in Seuilly are thinking."

"They're bored," Mathieu said drily. "Sedan ought to have roused them, but in fact it has only exaggerated their dullness. I have the impression that they sink themselves in boredom to avoid thinking — which may be natural and healthy for other nations, but not for us. The women are bored by their husbands' absence. You'd think they had discovered something perverse in Frenchmen becoming merely soldiers. As if it wasn't an instinct with us! And the men who are not in the army, and the soldiers on leave, talk about Germany's incredible strength — as if they've forgotten the fact that every other nation is stronger than we are, stronger but less enduring and less cunning. Suddenly, everything French, our gold, our young men, our vines, our poets — and down to our courage — weighs lighter than it did. Lighter than German courage and machinery and habits. And of course their tanks! So what can we do except throw our arms up and declare peace? . . . We shall discover then what a German peace weighs compared with a French one."

He had spoken without warmth, and without moving anything except his hands with that stiffness suggesting they must be nailed above the wrist.

"Oh, nonsense," Bergeot said. "They want to be told what to do."

"And you'll tell them?" Mathieu said, with his curious smile.

"Yes, certainly I will." Bergeot jumped up and began to walk about like a man trying to keep warm. He gesticulated. "This war isn't an affair only of soldiers. If it were

— say what you like, we are the best soldiers in the world. In any fair fight——

“There has never been such a thing,” Mathieu interrupted. “You’re ridiculous. We’re talking about war. Wars only start because one side is weaker than another.”

“Very well,” Bergeot said, stung, “in an unfair fight we can balance the account with our intelligence — we have plenty of it. But this is a war of civilians, it could be lost by them. It will be, if they have nothing to do in air-raids but count the bombs. I’m going to turn ordinary men and women into heroes by giving them shovels, lint, fire-engines——”

“You’re talking about civil servants and shopkeepers,” Mathieu interrupted.

“Yes, why not?”

“They’re moral cowards,” Mathieu said, “afraid of losing their money, of ridicule, of the future, of change, of dying poor, of dying. In uniform they die like poor devils. As civilians, they cheat, lie, save their money, and behave as the lower-middle-class always will — as meanly as possible.”

“It’s the class I come from,” Bergeot said.

“There are exceptions,” Mathieu said, after a moment. He moved his head slightly. . . . So he can move it? Bergeot thought. . . . “Do you know what my father was?”

“A Jew,” the Prefect said. He bit his lip.

“A Jewish bookseller. A completely honest bookseller, who was ruined and forced into bankruptcy by virtuous tradesmen, his neighbours — they even burned his house and shop. They were punishing him for his support of Dreyfus. The disgrace of the bankruptcy killed him, and not one of his neighbours — they had once been his friends — dared offend the others by coming to my mother’s help.” He was silent. “A young woman with a baby,” he said. “Those are your ordinary citizens.”

“You were unlucky,” Bergeot said.

Mathieu stretched his lips. “Perhaps.”

“Very well, tell me — what would you do — you — to prevent panic?”

“Oh, exactly what you suggest. And if air-raids are all we need be afraid of, you may be able to turn respectable citizens into heroes, prepared to fight for the Republic

instead of waiting for it to die of its own dryness."

"They won't be defending the dryness," Bergeot said with passion. "You can loathe it and what makes it. But even you must love the gesture a peasant makes when he points his field out to you — 'That's mine, monsieur' — and workmen who advise on the best way to build your cottage; the village inn-keeper cherishing his great-grandfather's recipe for stewing eels; old women who still, at eighty, work like saints; schoolmasters watching their shabbiest pupil in case he shows signs of being a genius. That's the Republic. It could be ruined. It's what we're defending!"

"Yes," Mathieu said coldly. "Of course."

The Prefect was silenced. He glanced at Mathieu, whose head was now hanging to one side — Ah, he's beginning to feel it, Bergeot thought — and wondered what the country meant to this man who certainly loved it. But it was absurd to think of Mathieu and love, or love and Mathieu. He had no friends, no wife and no mistress. No feeling. He would ignore the smile, protective or coquettish, that from one day to the next France gives all her children, the least deserving or the poorest. When he thought about her, what did he see?

"If you had to leave France — as a refugee, I mean — what would you miss most?"

Mathieu lifted his head.

"The light."

That explains why not a soul likes you! the Prefect thought ironically: you have no weaknesses. He felt inferior — it was an intolerable feeling — to this Jew whose imagination even was incorruptible. Mathieu had never wanted to be liked, his contempt for humanity made him invulnerable; his glance went directly to the other's weakness, like a worm; he himself could never be touched, since he loved no one — not even himself. What did he care about Seuilly? . . . Bergeot was seized by a rage of love for his town. It was not the most beautiful, certainly, of the Loire cities, a little crafty and reticent, shabby in spite of its rich citizens — they were cautious as well; at least one member in every family turned out a miser. But what a grace of light poured over the town from the river, what elegance in the old houses, what discreet delicacy of the past offering itself, with an innocent hypocrisy, to the future! When I

leave Seuilly, he thought, I shall regret it in all the moments when I regret not being young. It is my youth. Louis, poor devil, never was young and has nothing to regret. . . . Bergeot felt suddenly that he could force Mathieu to lower his gaze. Cold, penetrating, incorruptible as it was, it would be forced to drop before pity. He looked at Mathieu.

Mathieu's face was the image of shame and guilt. His eyes were clouded. Averting them hurriedly, he said,

"Bonamy spoke to you about the German camp at Geulin, didn't he?"

"Yes," Bergeot said: he seized joyfully the chance of hurting Mathieu. "Why did you send Bonamy? Why didn't you come yourself to ask me about your Boche friend?"

Mathieu had recovered himself. In a cold voice, he said, "Naturally—I didn't want to force myself on a hard-working Prefect."

"Well?" Bergeot said.

"The camp is a disgrace. A crime. The ground is waterlogged even in summer. You know it belongs to Labenne. He leased it to the War Office at some monstrous rent. Do you know who worked that for him? Huet. Our dear deputy."

"I'm not surprised," Bergeot said. He frowned. "Why need you worry? The men in Geulin are only Boches."

Mathieu was silent for a moment. "True."

"You hate the Germans so much that you would let France be destroyed, torn out of the ground with all its centuries—and cathedrals, villages, walled cities, trees, vineyards—sooner than given in. Why d'y'care what happens to the Germans in Geulin?" He smiled. "Or to one of them?"

"We all have our pet principles," Mathieu said calmly. "Mine is justice."

"Louis, I believe you're the devil," Bergeot cried. "I can't help admiring you. I've sent for Captain von Uhland's papers; if they're sound I'll slip him out at once."

Mathieu did not thank him. He bent his head, and after a moment stood up sharply. He might have been a skeleton straightening itself by a jack-knife spring of the knees, there was so little appearance of flesh under his clothes. The Prefect took a file of papers from a drawer and gave it to him.

"You'll find there all the details of my scheme. Every-

thing you'll need to support it in the *Journal*. I'm counting on you."

"You can count on me more safely than on some of your — friends," Mathieu said.

Bergeot let him reach the door. Then he said, "I want to tell you that you beat me fairly in history. What's more, you ought to have passed out the head of our year. I only beat you because I know how to put everything I have in the window, and because I don't mind bluffing. I bluffed my way above you."

Mathieu turned round. His smile, always a disguise of some sort, disguised him at this moment as a human being.

"You can use your charm on the others. Not on me."

"You think so little of me that you won't let me tell you the truth," the Prefect said gaily.

"It's too late for that particular truth. You should have handed it to me when I was lying on my floor going through an agony of shame and disappointment at being second."

"Good God, you can tell me that?"

"Why not?" Mathieu said.

Bergeot smiled at him. "You have no vanity at all."

"You have too much."

Bergeot reflected calmly. "It's because of my height," he said. "If I weren't a little man I shouldn't need all this Napoleonic energy. I could take things easy, and I needn't be on the offensive. You see, I have to make myself noticed and I have to be heard."

"This is one of the moments when I trust you," Mathieu said.

"Why not always?" the Prefect said simply.

Mathieu hesitated visibly. He looked Bergeot in the face. "What does it matter? I'm not in the habit of trusting people, I hear too much."

"About me, Louis?"

"I was thinking at the moment about our deputy. I've just had absolute proof that he has been sending money abroad. Well, what am I to do? Tell the Public Prosecutor? It would be no use. I shall have to expose him in the *Journal*."

The Prefect said nothing for a moment. He had never before had to conceal a blunder to do with money. He had no trick prepared. For an ordinary lie, which had to do only with politics, or an appointment, or a mistake he wanted to

cover up, he looked you in the eyes, with a truthful smile. When he was jealous of a man, he would repeat an idiotic story about him, nothing scandalous, merely ridicule. For every occasion where it would work, he had his charm, the warmth he could switch on in an instant if he needed approval, or an escape. But he was not used yet to having money hidden in New York. He was not even certain how much there was — was he lying about twenty thousand francs, a hundred thousand? . . . He groaned silently. He was genuinely ashamed. . . . He gave Mathieu an anxious smile, full of reserve.

"I beg you not to do it now," he said. "I don't want a scandal to take people's attention from the war. Leave it alone, Louis. You can do that sort of thing in peace time, but now— My God, do you think this the right moment to upset public confidence?"

Mathieu listened closely. He was not listening to the words. They were too adroit. He was listening instead to an incident from their past. In their last year at school, one of the masters, an obscure writer, named Monzie — Mathieu never forgot a name — made himself odious by his snobbishness. It is the last fault to be expected of a French schoolmaster, and he pushed it to the point of neglecting or sneering at every great writer who had not been socially reputable. It was Émile Bergeot who led his comrades in a campaign against this idiot. They were on the point of triumphing when the headmaster, only in the interests of discipline, turned the campaign slyly into a joke. Mathieu was the only one of them who saw that he would give way if the campaign went on. He rushed to warn Bergeot and found him shivering with disgust at the mere notion of going on, all he wanted was to forget the mistake he had made — and let it be forgotten.

He interrupted Bergeot. "Do you remember our literature master — M. Monzie?"

Bergeot looked at him with a blank face. There was no pretence about it, he had forgotten completely.

Mathieu made a reassuring remark, and went away.

Chapter 24

THE *New Order*, the rival paper to Mathieu's, was edited in two rooms, both poky, but it flattered Derval's vanity to sit in state in a cupboard marked Editor, with a window looking on the garden of the Town Hall. By pressing himself against the window, he could see a strip of rough grass, covered thickly with flowers from a chestnut tree, otherwise out of sight. A pane of the window, one only, opened. Derval stood with his head in the current of air, reading the letter from his father. It was short. It smelled of eucalyptus and tobacco. The lines were crowded together on the back of an old leaf from a diary — on the other side a mob of hieroglyphics stood for the names of patients to be visited. There was nothing in the letter except facts strung together without any visible string. "The walnuts will be good. Old Despard the notary is dead. The sun this May is too strong for my vines. Despard's son is a scoundrel, he is disputing my account. . . ." Written in a margin — "Don't be afraid of the news, we French always start badly. Have discovered that my captain in 1917, Colonel Ollivier, is commanding a tank battalion at Seuilly. Go to him and ask him to help you to get to the front. You can rely on him. Best love, Father. Jean-Émile Derval."

Derval knew that at precisely this hour of the endless May evening, his father, wearing a jacket too stained and shabby to be given away, would be shuffling about in slippers in his garden. From a corner of it you see the Vézère. And what a silence — except for the brushing together of leaves, the drooling of a pigeon, and from the kitchen a faintly sharp note when the servant begins to chop herbs for the evening omelette. And what emptiness, except for the Vézère, the vast blue of the sky, the strong evening sunshine, the scent of wild parsley, and all the other houses of Le Bugue — a town, not a village, but so small — crowding to the edge of the river. . . . His father would consider going out to the hotel to drink a glass of Monbazillac with the schoolmaster : watching the river, the two of them argued their out-of-date Liberalism. But since it was so warm, and he had had a long day — he never cut short a patient's blithering but listened

newspaper except to make yourself known !

"Propaganda," Labenne jeered : "when I make propaganda I make it for myself. D'y'see ? Now I'm going to look at your accounts. Prepare to be skinned."

At the end of an hour, Derval was not only skinned but gutted. He sat, trembling with exhaustion, on the edge of the desk. With the joy of a peasant in driving a hard bargain, Labenne had examined every figure ; he was sweating and as lively as a trout.

"I shall offer Monsieur de Thiviers the sum he's been wasting on it in one month."

"Will he accept ?" Derval asked.

"Listen. I never waste my time injuring a man who's on his way up. I make friends with him. But I have a nose" — it was long and fleshy, and dominated his terribly thick lips — "I can smell the moment when he begins to go down — a year sooner than his worst enemy, five years before he suspects it himself. That's when I close in on him. He looks strong — I get all the credit of fighting a powerful opponent — but I know the rot has started. I press on it. The moment comes when anyone can knock him out. Why should I bother ? Let someone else do it — and I — I — walk off with a reputation for magnanimity. . . . D'you imagine I'm boasting ? I never boast. Not I — I buy property. I've bought the château of Thouédun. D'y'see ? The swaggering feudal ape who built it five centuries ago built it for me, me, Georges Labenne ! Five centuries from now a Georges Labenne will be using it as a summer house. Five centuries ! We Labennes are immortal. . . . Property is safer than money. Why, it's the voice of money !"

Derval had recovered a little. "The Germans may bomb Thouédun," he said spitefully. "Or take it from you — if we're defeated."

"They won't take anything of mine," Labenne said.

He was silent. Derval looked uneasily over his shoulder. Yes, there they were, the two shabby old fellows from Le Bugue ; they had crept back. They made warning signs to him. . . . Look out, my boy ! Your new patron is a dirty dog — up to no good. Why should his château be spared ? Who's been promising him ? Look out ! . . . Nonsense, Derval said irritably — sheer melodrama. Go back to Le Bugue and take snuff. . . . He turned his back.

Labenne was smiling again, that smile of his which was either wolfish or charming, but in either mood showed off his bad teeth. He told Derval — using his charm, but making clear that it was an order — that he wanted his biography written : at once. Not out of vanity — “ I’m not, y’know, vain. . . . ” It was true ; his powerful body did not need vanity to keep it going. What he wanted was an advance on the immortality he had arranged ; he intended to set the legend going — about his luck, greed, cunning — and let it grow and roll him with it to the top of his ambition. And that was—? Labenne did not commit himself. . . .

“ You’ll begin with me rolling in the frozen mud outside the butcher’s shop and stop just as I reach the terrace of the château. . . . ”

Swollen by his greed for survival, he filled the room, making it difficult for any other creature to breathe in it. . . . At Le Bugue itself, the old doctor looked up at the single livid cloud coming into sight, and thought anxiously about his few vines. “ . . . Derval opened the window and let in a weak current of air. The late evening was dragging after it all the heat of the day, of every day. Never, there had never been a spring which gave so many signs of going on for ever : the men and women and infants who were dying in the invaded countries died in the promise of an eternity of sun and cloudless skies, among murmurs of well-being rising from every field and ditch.

“ Well ? ” Labenne said.

“ I’ll begin work on your life tomorrow,” Derval said.

Watching Labenne spread his arms, to let the air through the gaping front of his shirt, he comforted himself with the idea that in M. de Thiviers he still had a second and nobler patron. But the banker at this moment was almost as dwindled and remote a figure as the old doctor with his friend the poet under his arm walking down towards the Vézère.

“ Good,” Labenne said, showing his teeth. “ I’ll dictate the facts and you can put a good face on them.”

Derval asked nervously, “ What policy is the *New Order* to follow ? ”

“ Policy ? ” Labenne answered. “ Policy ? *I* am the policy of my paper. You can follow me.” He laughed at the young man’s bewildered look. “ We have only one duty,” he went on, in a dry voice. “ To prepare people

for the worst. Begin with 'Even if . . .' 'Even if France is destroyed . . . even if we lose two million young men . . .' Don't be afraid to let out the strength of the Germans. You'll be telling the truth, and that's a rare feat nowadays."

He got up and pushed his shirt back into place. Derval hurried to reach the door. "We haven't spoken about my salary," he said jauntily.

Labenne poked him in the ribs as though he were a cow for sale. "You're in debt, aren't you?"

"If I had another ten pounds a month——" Derval said.

"You'd spend it," Labenne interrupted. "Listen. You'll bless the day I gave you your first lesson in economy. Next month I'll pay you ten pounds less than you've been getting — and every month until you've paid your debts. Then I'll put you back where you were. You'll have something to work for. Forward, the young men! The future is yours."

He slammed the door.

All his humiliations tumbled at once on the young man. It was not only his debts, it was the phrase in his father's letter about getting to the front. And it was the contempt with which the critics in Paris had reviewed his first, his only novel. True, this had happened more than a year ago, before the war, but the teeth of the harrow were still rusting in his flesh; at the least chance they pressed down, and he writhed. There were even tears in his eyes. The reviewers, he didn't doubt, were Jews. And with that thought, hope pierced him. He looked again at his face in the glass, smiling at it with raised eyebrows, practising the delicious and cat-like charm he hoped would become second nature. On his way out he tried it on the porter's wife, who was sweeping the stairs. He took it as an omen when she did not remind him that he owed for a month.

He walked gaily to the Hôtel Buran, and sent his card up to the Baronne de Chavigny. He had written on it — "You won't remember the young man you met at Madame Huet's. I implore you to see me."

He waited. The doors into the dining-room were open: he saw Labenne settle himself into a chair, and the head waiter stooping over him with tender anxiety. Obviously he was advising this or that dish: Labenne listened to him with the severity of lust.

"The Baroness will see you."

He was shown into the sitting-room of her suite. No one was in this large room, which was as littered as though Mme de Chavigny ate, slept, dressed in it. A fur cloak lay across one of the sofas, with a pair of shoes, and a book, its leaves creased. Automatically — he had been punished too often for ill-treating a book — he smoothed them and closed it. Which of the photographs scattered over the tables was the Baroness herself? Not having any use for her at that time, he had barely glanced at her when Mme Huet presented him. . . . A half-empty box of crystallised fruits, a bottle of perfume, open, a lipstick, the stalk of a bunch of grapes; both window-seats were strewn with gloves, handkerchiefs, handbags. How like a pawn-shop! He pressed his forehead, to cool it, against the window. In this light the Loire slipped under the bridge like grey smoke; wisps blew up under the trees of the island. He heard the Baroness come into the room, and turned round — smiling, lifting his eyebrows.

He saw a big strong woman, with a lively face and thick ankles. Her dress, of yellow velvet, was open to the knees; her shoulders and the upper part of her breasts had all the air of emerging from a partly peeled banana. Nothing about her was attractive except her look of energetic good-temper. With some pain, the young man kept his seductive smile on his face: he was not prepared for a hoydenish middle-aged woman.

"Do forgive me," he said in a boyish voice; "we had so little talk the other evening, but I know we were going to be friends. Alas, you were swept away from me." He kissed her hand: thick and sallow, every finger carried two or more rings. "You said I might call."

"Did I?" she said, puzzled.

"I didn't hope you would remember," Derval sighed. "I remembered, of course. It would be hard to forget you, you're so marvellously, what shall I say? — living."

He judged that gross flattery would go down better with her than subtleties. He was partly right. Léa de Chavigny was gullible and shrewd; she swallowed his flattery, believing it; in the same moment her eyes watched him to find out why he was trying to charm her. At her silliest, she was the daughter of a Jewish banker. Derval talked in an eager voice. He reminded her of intelligent remarks she had not made; and smiled at her with a young impudent devotion.

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When he guessed that she was in the right mood of maternal excitement, he said boldly,

"Did you forget you were going to contribute to the fighting fund of my paper?"

"I can't remember a thing about it," she said with a frank incredulity. "Had I been drinking? Why should I give you money?"

Derval frowned. "Me? I don't want you to give me money," he said in a brutal voice. "But you know what I'm doing. I told you. We must turn all these Eastern European Jews out of France before they ruin the country. They're all Bolshevik agents, and French Jews must do everything possible to get rid of them. You are a Jew. You are also a beautiful and good Frenchwoman, and your husband belongs to an old Catholic family. For your own sake, you must support the campaign I'm mounting against them in my paper. But you see it — I needn't tell you, you have the mind of a great woman, an Esther."

His brutality, following his flatteries, had an effect neither would have had alone. She was shaken and alarmed. Her natural shrewdness was no use to her against a nightmare she recognised instantly as one of her own. She began to slip the rings off her fingers, only keeping back the two most valuable.

"Yes, yes, I remember," she said. "You can have these for your fund. I'm sure you'll succeed."

Derval kissed her hand again. He had not expected to be given more than a small cheque, and he had to hide his excitement and a light feeling of shame. As calmly as possible he said,

"You're very generous. I shall never forget it. Count on me to do anything I can for you."

Mme de Chavigny looked at him with what from any other woman would have been an invitation. It was purely a matter of form; she was the loyal respectable wife of a husband who did not take any trouble to hide his infidelities.

"Then we're friends?" she said, smiling.

"It's a great honour for me," Derval said. He leaned his head towards her, with his charming gaze. "You're an intoxicating friend, Baroness."

"Why not Léa?"

"Léa," he murmured.

"My relations," she went on in her loud friendly voice, "call me Bobo."

"Bobo. How delicious!"

He held both her hands for a moment, admiring the bluish marks left on her fingers. He rearranged the scene in his mind. . . . I must have talked like a statesman, he thought: a simple movement of generosity on her part brought me her rings — which I shall put to the noblest purpose. He stood up, bowed to her with a great deal of dignity. And left.

He took the rings directly to Mme Vayrac. She was alone, and welcomed him with the smile she kept for good-looking young men. She put an arm round and kissed him with frank pleasure, running her hands down his sides before she told him to sit down.

"Why have you come to see me? You must want something."

"To see you, my dear Léonie."

Mme Vayrac's laughter shook her soft body. "Yes, yes," she murmured, "now tell me why you've come."

"I want a little money."

"So you came to me," she said, smiling. "My dear pretty boy, I have no money. Let me give you a brandy instead."

"Very well. But I have something to show you," Derval said, pouting.

Mme Vayrac looked closely at each ring. You could see the figures falling into place behind her eyes, behind the sluttish good-humour.

"Where did you get them?"

"From the Baronne de Chavigny."

"What?"

"No, no," Derval said, rolling his eyes. "She gave them to me because she's anti-Semitic and she hopes I'm going to rescue France from the Jews."

"You've made a beginning," Mme Vayrac said cynically. "So you want me to buy these? Very well, my dear boy, I'll give you a thousand francs."

Derval was sharply disappointed. "They're worth far more than that."

"Of course. You could get more from Naudin, in the High Street. But you don't want your Baroness to see them in his window? I'll make it eleven hundred."

"Twelve."

She came back so quickly with the money that she caught him posing before a mirror. He was not, as he would have been with anyone else, abashed. Neither lusts nor vanities were shocking when Mme Vayrac looked at them from eyes so thumbled by experience that their surface had become greasy and clouded. He put the notes in his pocket and asked,

"Were you satisfied with the article I printed yesterday about Edgar? I did it rather well, I thought."

She looked at him with a severity that made him feel small. "You'll find I've added five hundred francs to the twelve. Wasn't that what we agreed?"

Derval said "Yes," sullenly.

Mme Vayrac patted his arm. "Now, my dear boy," she said in a warm voice, "I'm very fond of you. You know I adore Edgar, and I thought for a moment you were sneering at him."

He began vehemently to protest. The door opened and Jacques de Saint-Jouin came in. He greeted Mme Vayrac with a politeness a shade too good to be real: it underlined in the most light-hearted way that he was condescending to a Mme Vayrac. With the same charming insolence he said to Derval,

"What — you here, my dear Gabriel? Splendid! I thought you always inked yourself to the bone at this time in the evening?"

He was very much at home. He seated himself on the couch beside his hostess, stretching his legs, and chattered to her. Derval listened without putting in a word. He saw, with exasperation, that although Mme Vayrac talked to both of them with the same familiarity and warmth, she treated Saint-Jouin with respect: he was torn between jealousy and quivers of pleasure that for the first time since they met Saint-Jouin had used his Christian name. He admired Saint-Jouin and longed frantically to impress him. But what hope had he of impressing a young man who added to physical beauty the delicious arrogance of his family? Derval lolled in his chair with false ease, waiting for a chance to show off his intelligence.

"My dear Léonie," Saint-Jouin cried, "they're even talking of cancelling my show! And when I'd arranged every item. The Prefect has gone into a spin — perhaps his

dear Marguerite has been nagging him. My God, what a bore this war is. Do you know what I think? It would be a sound idea to let Hitler run France for a while. At least we should have peace and I could get away from this barbaric life. I suppose he'd want paying to do it. But really, do I care a hoot about Morocco and the rest? What use is a lot of sand to me?" He threw Derval a smile. "You agree with me, Gabriel, old boy, don't you?"

Again Derval quivered with happiness. He sat up and drawled,

"But we should be infinitely richer without our empire! If someone would only take the expense of it off our hands . . ."

Saint-Jouin had watched him with a fine smile. "Do you really think so? What a pity no one reads your articles. I'm talking nonsense — my servant does. I shouldn't be surprised if you have quite a following among him and his friends."

Mme Vayrac laughed. Furiously mortified, Derval said to her,

"But Saint-Jouin doesn't read anything except the sports news, he can't even write a letter."

Saint-Jouin had snubbed him purely out of mischief; he now turned his back and let him sit glowering and sulking, while he talked to Mme Vayrac.

"I met a ravishing creature on the stairs. Do tell me who she is. Tall and red-haired. The very type I like."

"No, no, my dear boy," Mme Vayrac said, laughing. "She's not for you. You're quite right, she's charming — and she deserves to have a charming life. She shall have it."

"You have no aesthetic conscience. You'll part with this beautiful creature to one of your tottering clients without a qualm. Now, if you let me have her——"

"She would starve," Mme Vayrac said. "That's enough, let's talk about something else. Tell me, the news is quite bad, isn't it? Is it beginning to be serious?"

"Not at all," Saint-Jouin cried. "It won't be allowed to become serious. I can assure you. My mother writes to me from Paris that peace terms are already being discussed. She has a cousin in Germany who is very close to Goering, and we hear regularly. Believe me, there's not going to be

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any romantic nonsense. Something quite reasonable will be arranged." He turned to Derval. "You must know all about it," he said with a little air of deference. "You literary chaps hear everything."

"I have no German cousins, and my mother writes to me about the neighbours," Derval said. He was surprised that he was able to speak coolly : he would have given both his ears to produce a cousin friendly with Ciano.

"But how charming," Saint-Jouin said carelessly.

Derval's rage got the better of him — fed by his outraged vanity. For a moment he forgot that it was not Saint-Jouin who had cursed his novel and wounded him in that delicate organ, the pride of a writer who is certain he has enemies. He controlled himself.

"Not at all charming," he said coldly. "My parents are simple people who do their duty."

"What could possibly be more idyllic?" Saint-Jouin cried. He was amused by Derval's irritated vanity. He quite liked Derval, and had a genuine admiration for what he called his terrible intellect. Mark my words, he used to say : one of these days he'll put us all in a book ; I warn you, he's abominably clever.

Mme Vayrac leaned forward. She put a hand on Saint-Jouin and with the other patted Derval's cheek. She spoke in her slow voice, that curious voice, full of warmth, coaxing, and yet muted. You could imagine her quieting a child, or grieving, but not scolding with it.

"You must both go now. One of my tottering clients, a Senator — you see I'm not afraid to tell you — is coming to look at my niece — the girl you saw on the stairs, my dear Saint-Jouin. Off you go, children. I love you both."

On the landing Saint-Jouin slipped his arm in Derval's, and began talking to him as he would to a nervous horse. He could not help a slight smile at Derval's eagerness to be soothed and flattered ; he hid it quickly. Nothing bored him so much as other people's unhappiness, he never listened to a story about illness or tragedy, even when the sufferer was his close friend ; he would, if it did not inconvenience him too much, take trouble to ward off an unhappiness threatening one of his friends, driven to it by his horror of being involved — "Robert," his friends said, "is so warm-hearted, so sensitive . . ." At this moment, Derval was convinced that he had misunderstood Saint-

Jouin ; no such friendly and modest young man could have been insolent or cruel.

" A bit thick, don't you think, old Mother Vayrac ? She makes a fortune out of her *nieces*. What an old whore, eh ? "

" Yes, yes, I agree," Derval said eagerly.

They had reached the foot of the stairs. Saint-Jouin let go Derval's arm, and lifted one of the curtains covering the wall.

" You know this house was built for a canon of the Abbey Church in the sixteenth century ? Yes, really. This passage used to be a cloister. Some time in the next century it was walled-in and panelled ; the panels were painted by — a famous artist, I've forgotten his name. If you put your nose to them you'll see traces of the painting, it was all about a female saint — a miracle of some sort, but I forget what."

It was precisely and neatly a miracle. From dismembered fragments, the handle of a tool, a bone, lying among guessed-at forms of flowers and leaves, there sprang so clear an image of violent and tragic death, of hands turning to roots and foreheads bound by grass, that you could think the artist had simply left on the walls the print of an agonised idea, without taking pains to draw it. The impression of greedy voluptuous forms came from just those panels where the colour had completely vanished. . . . Saint-Jouin let the curtain swing back.

" How d'you know so much about this house ? " Derval asked inquisitively.

" Oh, it belonged to my family. An ancestor of ours built it. My great-grandfather sold it to a tradesman of some sort. We used to have about when I was a child a book of copies of the paintings, a tutor of mine was keen on them."

Saint-Jouin spoke with an air of frivolity — and indeed he was completely indifferent. Yet it was only pride in his family that made him remember the paintings. He expected Derval to make a flattering comment. That would have pleased him. But Derval was too much the egoist, and too touchy, to think of it.

They strolled together as far as the embankment. Pressing their hands on the wall, its stones still warm, they watched the Loire running in the darkness.

" I can smell the sea in her," Derval said.

" But for this fatuous war," Saint-Jouin said carelessly, " I should be on leave."

Chapter 25

CATHERINE had been home a week. She was beginning to feel — not safe, she had given up looking for safety in her mother or her mother's house — but she was happy. She had disposed her life inside the life of the household. All the arrangements Mme de Freppel had made before she came, to avoid trouble when Catherine wanted to be with her, were no use. In the morning Catherine drank her coffee in her own room, and vanished into the garden; she never offered to go into Seuilly with her mother; she showed no interest in her, no curiosity. Mme de Freppel had rehearsed an emotional little scene, in which she would tell her that in every real sense Bergeot was her father now. It was a failure.

"Monsieur de Freppel——" she began in a calm voice.

"My father came to see me last term," Catherine said lightly.

"You never told me."

"I didn't think about it," Catherine said, smiling.

This smile baffled her mother. She dared not make a fuss, since it was important not to rouse in Catherine any sympathy for her father. And she was defeated by the candour and indifference of Catherine's smile. Was she really candid? Or was it the fine edge of guile? She felt completely at a loss.

"What did he want?" she asked in a friendly voice.

"I think, nothing. He stayed an hour, and told me about the election when he was elected to the Senate, and the troubles he has with a doctor who is a Freemason. That was all."

Her mother was afraid to break through this indifference. How little she knew about this girl. Four years' absence had rubbed off every mark by which a mother, recognising herself in her child, knows how to act. Catherine bore none of those touches a careful mother leaves on the creature she has handled since birth. She was unsigned and new; her eyes, reflecting her naïve egoism, were clouded only by her own stammering thoughts. The mother felt a sudden anguish: it was partly guilt and partly pity for herself — and it

was anguish, and as long as she lived it would never wholly leave her.

"You know why I left your father."

Catherine said nothing. She smiled in a friendly way.

"He was cruel——"

"He's very boring," Catherine said. "He talks nonsense."

In the same moment when she felt pleased, Mme de Freppel thought: And perhaps I bore her? She began to talk quickly and clumsily about Émile, his kindness in looking after their affairs, how devoted he was to Catherine herself, how intelligent, and reliable, and sweet-tempered. The girl listened with the same smiling friendly look, and the instant her mother hesitated, at a loss for the next phrase, kissed her lightly, and said,

"That's quite all right. We needn't talk about it. You know I'm very happy at home, you needn't worry about anything. I should like, though, to do some work at the hospital. Perhaps Émile" — she marched calmly over the name — "can help me."

There was nothing for her mother to do but accept this re-writing of her little scene. And pretend — for the sake of her self-respect — that she had collaborated in it.

Catherine had fixed on a part of the garden where no one went. Hidden from the windows of the Manor House by a bush, she could lie out on the wall level with the lawn — the reflection of its lowest stones ran out broken and flickering into the Loire — and watch the island moored opposite the house being tugged at by the current. She was long-sighted. On the opposite bank a pair of magpies darted between the willows; she counted the seconds of their flight across the space of blond air. An even number — and her mother would forget that she ought to explain herself and her life. Anything but that! Catherine thought. Anything, but not the embarrassment of having to watch an emotion which, since it affected people as old as her parents and Monsieur Émile Bergeot, struck her as ridiculous and unreal. She determined from today to live by making use only of the simplest statements. . . . I am hungry. I like swimming in the open sea. Trees make me smile. Look at the magpies. . . . Instead of forming the shortest arc, they chose to shoot up and down, up and down, like the jet from a fountain — thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. . . . I shall keep out

of her way for a few days. I don't want to know anything about anything. . . . She shut her eyes, stretching herself on the wall, like a lizard. I am warm. The sun is a warm fleece. . . . Suddenly she remembered pushing into her pocket two letters from friends who left school before she did, and had not yet given up hope of getting replies to their letters. She opened one. Valérie was engaged, and her young man of course was in the Maginot — "Why don't you write to me?" And the other: "I am learning to drive an ambulance; it's thrilling, marvellous; why don't you write? I am forgetting what you look like and you know I live on my memories. At nineteen I am an old woman. Your Bella."

She tore both letters up and dropped them into the Loire. I shall become a nurse, she thought. I shall marry a man who is longer-sighted than I am; our children will be able to see at night and under water. No, I shall marry a poet, then they will be able to see the Loire from its source to its end, mountain to sea, and flowing along the bed of the sea, keeping itself to itself as an honest river should: it passes through a wreck; it is an English wreck, but there was a French sailor on board: Good God, say his bones, the Loire — come all the way from Berthenay to look for me — and he hurries to jump into the current and swim home. . . .

Gentle cheerful Father Lotte, to whom she confessed at school, reproved her for day-dreaming too often. Once he set her, a task for a whole day, to begin something active the moment she caught her mind sliding into a dream. For the other girls it was a day of terrible confusion and trial. Catherine tidied her locker; then she tidied the other lockers, ruthlessly destroying everything she said was rubbish; she made a fair copy of her essay, and offered to copy out and improve all the other essays in her class: the master who visited them from the lycée was astonished to find repeated in every essay that week — whether it was Napoleon in Moscow, or Why I prefer Orléans to Tours — the sentence, "*Ô Nuit, tu es la nuit*, as Péguy said." On the Loire as in Moscow the night refused to explain itself further.

The slight feeling of guilt which Father Lotte had managed to give her drove her to jump up and run back to the house. It was full evening now, the plain had drafted off its shadows to thicken trees and hedges; between them, the river was still insolently full of light. She gave

it a last look before stepping into the library. Dazzled, she did not recognise Lucien for a second. Nor, for another reason, did he see her come in. He had taken off his glasses and was rubbing them carefully with a silk handkerchief full of holes, so many holes that his fingers kept touching the glass and he had to begin again. He put them on, recognised her, blushed.

Catherine blinked at him. "You're not long-sighted, are you?"

"No. Far from it."

"You can't, for instance, see in the dark?"

"Can you?" Lucien parried.

"Or under the Loire?"

"Without my glasses I can't see you across this room," he said gloomily. "Except, of course, that I know your shape. Your neck bends and comes up again properly, like a stalk. Many people seem to have a rusty hinge there. And then, your shoulders, of course——"

"Oh," Catherine said.

"I can't help noticing shapes," Lucien went on, with a stubborn face. "I never saw anyone clearly when I was a child. I lived in a world of assorted shadows, thin, straight, crooked, round, like ramrods, like mushrooms, like anything but human beings——"

"Why didn't you wear spectacles?"

Lucien was standing stiffly, looking at her without moving his head; evidently he preferred shadows that were ramrods. His face was still brick-red.

"We were poor. Are, I mean. My mother used to work in the fields, when she married she worked in her house eighteen hours a day, I used to wake up in the kitchen at night and see her moving about — like a very strong tree. She was at work for us children. When my brother got his bursary, she said to me: And you're the next. And when I was at Lakanal, he was at the École Normale, and she said: Your turn next. . . . But I wanted to study law — ever since my father lost a law-suit he had, and my mother cried. The only time. . . . I had glasses for the first time when I went to school, and my first idea was to become a painter, I was stunned by the avalanche of colours and sharp edges. You can't imagine what it was like to see the light green of birch trees on the darker green of pines. My next idea——"

"What was it?" she asked.

"Nothing. You'll laugh. I decided to be a baker. I was always hungry. . . . You know, it's not unpleasant to have two worlds. I see you as a smudge in one — oh, quite small. And then — well, there you are with your hair coming down and a large tear in your skirt."

He thinks something of himself, and he's shockingly modest, she thought, surprised. She put a hand on her hair.

"Is that why you're not in the army?"

"Yes," Lucien said. He drew himself up. "No. I could be in. There are soldiers as short-sighted as I am."

"Then why — ? Didn't you want to be?" She spoke quickly. "I'm not being rude."

"I know," Lucien said. He blushed again. It was noticeable only because the colour this time spread out of sight down his neck. "He asked for me. And really he needs me. No one else would work half the night with him. I don't often fall asleep."

"He?"

"The Prefect. Do you know, he's magnificent. He ought to be in the Government, he ought to be directing this war. There's nothing weak about him, I can see him fighting on alone, rallying the country — you should hear him when we're alone and he says whatever comes into his head. He—"

He stopped abruptly.

After a pause to enjoy his stiff-necked embarrassment, Catherine said, "I want to work in the hospital in Seuilly. I did First Aid at school. Could he help me?"

"Of course," the young man said eagerly. "As soon as things look worse, he's going to send the civilian sick into the country, to make room in the wards for air-raid casualties. He takes care of everything."

Catherine laughed. "How you admire him!"

He was uncertain how to take this. Had he offended her by talking about her mother's lover? Did she know anything about that? So far as he knew, the innocence of well-brought-up young girls lasts until their first quarrel with life; and Catherine — you had only to look at her — was all pride and happiness. He looked, and was ready to cut his tongue out. She was certainly laughing at him.

The silence lasted until Catherine switched on the wireless. The Prime Minister was speaking. They listened,

with an air of constraint and obedience, like children before a headmaster, until the words, "It is not true that the Government has decided to leave Paris. . . ."

"Do you think things are going badly?" she asked, in a brusque voice.

"I shall know when they do," Lucien said. He spoke with a poor clumsy air of confidence. "I have a friend — at least, I know Colonel Rienne — he's promised, if things do begin to go badly, to get me into something at once. I should prefer tanks. In a tank you needn't see far."

Catherine shut off the wireless. The false confidence of Reynaud was replaced in the room by the ignorance and sincere vanity of youth.

"Will the Germans bomb Paris?"

"Of course," Lucien said.

"I ought to feel sorry," Catherine said. "But the truth is I never think about Paris. I've seen two photographs, one of a twelfth-century house, the other of children's hoops being sold in the Tuileries. In between, nothing. I shall be sorry if the Germans destroy the house, I might have gone there one day and touched something a woman touched when it was new. When I do that, I believe in history. All the rest must be lies. . . . Perhaps they'll bomb Seuilly."

"Let them," Lucien said vehemently. "We're the only truly inventive nation in the world. We can invent another Paris, and another Seuilly. We can invent the future."

He forgot himself so far as to flourish his arms. One of them caught a vase, it reeled and Catherine caught it. She tried to reassure him. He was stupid with horror. He stammered,

"Oh, my God."

"Not at all," Catherine said. "But do sit down. Why did you come here?"

"I — I'm waiting for the answer to a letter."

"From — from Émile?"

Lucien opened his eyes. "Do you call him that?"

"What ought I to call him?" she said calmly.

He said nothing. Cruelly pretending to examine the vase for signs of damage, she studied him eagerly. She guessed that behind his simplicity he was obstinate and intelligent. He had the air of a peasant. His skin was fair, fairer than her own. He's obviously strong, she thought. What a pity he's short-sighted. It must be misery for a child to

be short-sighted, but then his mother could keep him close to her and show him everything — for instance, magpies. She shook herself guiltily. Quick ! She jumped up.

“ Shall we go out ? ”

“ The letter——” he said, hesitating.

“ Just across the lawn to the river. If you won’t, I shall never ask you again.”

The sunlight had gone and the light was going, but Catherine preferred to think it was early morning. She noticed a yellow bindweed and ignored the bushes of peonies ; the bindweed was new and small, that is, handsome and impressive : the air was fresh, stinging, clear, as it is towards dawn, it had innocence, energy ; it was the first day of her life, that is, the most beautiful. When the Germans destroy France, she thought, and Lucien has rebuilt it, it will be like this.

“ Do you see those magpies at the other side ? ” she said hastily.

“ Yes.”

“ Take off your glasses. Now what do you see ? ”

“ Only the evening, which is like the evening, and the Loire — which is like the Loire.”

“ Péguy said, *O Nuit, tu es la nuit.*”

Lucien looked at her admiringly. “ How much you must have read ! ”

“ It’s the only line I know,” she said after a minute. She blushed.

“ How honest you are ! ”

They stood side by side, watching the light taking refuge below the surface of the river. I could work eighteen hours a day for my children, Catherine thought. And I shan’t send any of them away. She felt a confused sense of joy.

“ The other day,” Lucien was saying, “ you despised and hated me.”

Looking at him ironically she said, “ Do you like explaining yourself ? ”

“ No ! ”

“ Neither do I. What a mercy.”

“ I must go back to the house.”

“ You couldn’t for once forget how important you are ? ”

“ No.”

“ If I asked you——”

“ Certainly not,” Lucien shouted.

He glared at her. How stupid he is, she thought. How stupid. How commonplace. How strong. How handsome. She yawned, to show that she was bored. They went back to the house in silence. Catherine left him outside the French-window of the library and ran off to the left — direction of the heart — through the courtyard, and turned back to the kitchen — direction of the instincts. She found her friend and ally skimming bowls of milk ranged on the stone shelves of the dairy. Throwing her arms round Sophie's neck, that yellow bundle of tendons, she asked,

"Sophie, my angel, do children take after the mother or the father?"

"Sons after the mother, daughters after their father."

"You're sure?"

"Perfectly. I've always heard it. These things are well known. But — who is it you're hugging?" Sophie grumbled. "Let me be. You're strangling me."

Chapter 26

RIENNE woke happy. He remembered that the news was bad, German armoured troops were pouring through a breach opened in the Maginot dam, but he was happy. He took it as an omen. Today, he said to himself, they will be turned back. Leaning out of the window of his room, he was offered omens on every hand. It was six o'clock. The air on this side of the courtyard was still cool, it promised victory and freshness: the stone ledge, a handsome infant of a hundred and fifty years, spoke about newness, a new beginning — as if France were about to begin, as if the word France were going to be spoken for the first time, in an attentive world. In a world so young as this, tragedy was a child's moment of grief — endless and nothing.

When he went into his general's room, he found, as usual, that Ligny had been awake for hours, and was reading. Ligny closed the book.

"Listen, my dear boy. . . . *Mes sœurs, l'onde est plus fraîche aux premiers feux du jour.* . . . How old I am, and

how young everything else is ! It's desperate." He laughed. "Come along now, we're going to have breakfast in the nursery."

Rienne followed him into General Piriac's room. Woerth was there already, seated at one side of the bare table, between the table and the window. The room was as empty as Rienne's own, except for more shelves, with books and files drawn up on parade, and an iron crucifix on the wall at the foot of the camp-bed. On the table were bowls of coffee, four rolls, a dish of honey and a very little butter. Piriac broke his roll into his coffee and sucked it through the edges of his moustache. Very like an elephant at play, he was teasing Woerth because an anonymous admirer had sent the chief of staff a formal bouquet.

"I've sent for an interpreter," he said, "he'll read you the language of flowers and you can compose a reply."

"With what?" Woerth said. He was taking it well.

"I have a window-box," Ligny said. "Water-cress and nasturtiums. Do you want to cool her off or inflame her?"

The three of them elaborated the joke with the innocence of subalterns taking part in manœuvres — except that subalterns are a little less innocent and manœuvres a serious matter, infinitely more serious than a war. One's future may depend on solving the exercise set with a stream which represents the Meuse and a village representing Sedan. The true Meuse, the true Sedan, are less important. Besides, they were already — by this morning — lost. Suddenly Rienne felt himself old, as old as France; all his careful hard-working peasant ancestors pinched his bones with their gnarled fingers.

Piriac's servant went out of the room, and Ligny said,

"What's wrong with your man, sir? He looks as though he'd been drinking all night."

"You mean his eyes?" Piriac said calmly. "Oh, he's been crying, I suppose. His wife is dead. He wanted to go and see her when she was ill, and now she's dead he wants to go to the funeral."

"You're letting him go?"

"Certainly not. I dislike having a new man to wait on me."

The noise of a wall collapsing was so clear in Rienne's head that he glanced at the window, expecting that the barracks had gone. But it was only the superb legend, built

up during more than forty years, of Piriac's kindness to his men. This tremendous edifice rested on half a dozen phrases, on the memory he used to have for a face. It could be destroyed in a minute, and so far as Rienne was concerned, now had been. He looked at the commander-in-chief's heavy square body propped between his chair and the table, and saw it as a monument, made of callousness and stupidity, to the dead legend. Glancing at Ligny, he saw that he was meditating some not so innocent mischief.

Ligny spoke in a mild voice.

"You've read this morning's despatch, sir?"

Piriac said, "Yes," heavily, a paw crushing its victim.

"We can talk about that later," Woerth said coldly.

"I should like to hear Colonel Rienne's opinion," Ligny said, smiling. "Out of the mouths of babes . . . Rienne, my boy, what's your idea of the tactics to be used now?"

Rienne was well used to being the victim of Ligny's pleasure in annoying Woerth. "Surely, sir, the troops in Belgium ought to be retired at top speed to the Somme, and every tank in the country thrown into the German salient?"

Ignoring Rienne, Woerth said,

"My dear Ligny, when war is made according to the fancies of your subordinates, you will no doubt be put in charge."

Ligny, as absorbed as a child in his game, hid his smiles.

"What's your theory of modern war?"

"There is no such thing as modern war. There is war," Woerth said, frowning. "Which is a pure question of mathematics. A certain proportion of men and territory lost equals defeat. The proportion varies according to the value given to the terms of the equation. Everything else is metaphors for the use of children — who are amused by counting apples instead of decimals. That's all."

"Ah," Ligny said, smiling openly, "that's what you were taught on papa Gigi's staff. Do you know what I think? It's Calvinism — and you a good son of the Church! It's the purest determinism, without a rag of faith. And counting men and kilometres — you might be behind the counter of a shop! Tradesman!"

At this moment an officer came in with the mail for Woerth. Before Woerth could dismiss him, Ligny had asked him innocently how far the Germans had advanced in the last twenty-four hours.

"Thirty-two kilometres, four hundred and seventy metres."

"You were on General Giginac's staff, weren't you?" Ligny smiled.

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so. He made a great point of arithmetic."

With a cold fury, Woerth sent away the officer. He looked sourly at Ligny.

"No doubt you were taught some esoteric theory of war. According to you, it's chance, or aeroplanes — or astrology."

"Not at all," Ligny said pleasantly. "War is art. Perhaps religious art. The Pope, at the head of a General Staff of cardinals with red hats, sends out his Bulls, the humble obey. There are also the few saints, with their genius for improvising a victory — naturally they are dismissed or degraded, and afterwards canonised. Properly looked at, it's fascinating."

During the last two or three minutes Rienne had been watching General Piriac. Barely perceptible movements of his face betrayed that somewhere behind the outwork of bone and heavy flesh a thought had begun to move. It moved from handhold to handhold, like a child learning to walk. He now uttered one word.

"Verdun."

It meant, as Rienne knew, that in its sedulous journey upward, his mind had reached the months during the last war when he was on Pétain's staff at Verdun. He had had a terrifying vision of defeat there. He had never been able to understand why Verdun did not equal defeat.

Without moving his head — he moved as little as possible — he looked at his chief of staff. "What did you say?"

Bewildered, Woerth said, "What do you mean, sir?"

"The Seine will be defended," Piriac muttered.

Woerth spoke gently. "What — for twenty years — has been our nightmare? Invasion. Always invasion. Against it we built the Maginot. There is no Maginot. It has been breached. A torrent of machines is rushing across our fields and villages. We cannot reach the Seine in time to stop it. Where can we stop it? Where do we draw the line below which anything we write stands for defeat?"

Ligny had been sand-bagging the edge of his plate with fragments of bread. He swept them away now and turned on Woerth a look of pretended awe.

"How simple you make it all! Tell me — did you see yesterday's *Journal*? The editor has yet another theory of war, the — what shall I call it? — the natural-historical theory . . . he demands that all the towns and villages in the bed of the torrent shall roll up into hedgehogs of guns, sacrificing themselves to delay the Germans until our armies of the Loire and the Midi can be brought up. Interesting, what?"

Ligny knew that Woerth looked on Jews and the foreigners in France as a patch of leprosy, a gangrened wound. To round off his joke he turned to Rienne and asked what he thought of Mathieu, who had written the article.

Rienne said, "He is a good Frenchman." He reflected that if Woerth had been asked to collaborate with God in making a Frenchman he would have left out every taint of enthusiasm, prophecy, scepticism, as well as all the natural appetites which make a Frenchman the soundest as well as the least tractable of human beings. What would be left? A country in which a soldier who is a good Catholic, with simple tastes, and a belief in chastity and obedience, feels at home. Rienne himself would be at home in any age of simple honourable faith, but — what a drawback! — he was not prepared to massacre his fellows to create an illusion of one. He had the modesty, as well as its pride, of his race. Of his French race.

Woerth spoke coldly to him. "I believe you're also a friend of Monsieur Bergeot. Of the Prefect. You could usefully tell him that he is playing with revolution. How does he know that all these factory hands he wants to excite about the war won't turn against the State? If we fight a long war, they will. Defeat in the next week or two equals a compromise with Hitler. An endless exhausting war equals Stalin. Between these two, any sane man knows what to think."

"Why not think simply of France?" Ligny said soberly.

"I am thinking of France."

And if he collaborates on a new France, thought Rienne, he will leave out the half-dozen young men and women dancing, to an accordion and a fiddle hidden behind a rood-screen of branches, in the shabby squares of villages on the evening of July 14; and the patient wolfish men arguing over a glass of wine at the wooden table outside cafés; and the tongues clacking at every corner; and the poachers lying

out between stream and forest ; and the millions of dead entrenched along the Marne, along the Somme, along the Vosges, across every route habitually used by the invaders of France ; not to speak of the poets, and the young men who preferred strolling to marching. It will be a France where no one will dare to invent anything. What a bore !

Piriac's mind had passed another stage of its blind journey. " My people here," he said slowly, " are good people. They are good children. They are not like the politicians, corrupt. If one of them is disobedient he can be chastised." He looked at Woerth as though he were repeating a lesson. " We have the power."

Woerth made a show of asking Ligny's permission to employ his A.D.C., his own being on leave.

" My dear fellow, you do as you like," Ligny said ironically.

" I'm obliged to you," Woerth said in a dry voice. He turned to Rienne. " Go across the bridge and inform Colonel Ollivier that I shall inspect the defences on Sunday. On Sunday. You understand ? "

Rienne withdrew. As he shut the door he felt that they were all, even Ligny, glad to get rid of him. He embarrassed them. When he was in the room with them they suppressed the subaltern, living in each of them, and the middle-aged officer whose life had been blamelessly spartan, simple, upright. They were forced to live at least in the last war. The moment he went they could slip back yet another fifteen years. Piriac another twenty-five. They have still, he thought, their youth. Then what is it they lack ? Simply the future — in which none of them, not even my dear Ligny, believes.

Chapter 27

HE was glad of the chance to see Colonel Ollivier. Ollivier was his other close friend, his friend by choice — chosen for him by himself — as Émile Bergeot was his friend by birth. Michel Ollivier was the first person who spoke to him at the Polytechnique. When Rienne thought of him he could only

evoke the young man of that first morning, with his air of innocence, of knowing nothing of the world. How unlike Émile's practised assurance! Yet Michel had his own confidence. He was countrified, he never lost the look of being more used to a harrow than a sword, but when he came in it was with an air of being welcome: he looked straight at your face, with candour — and it was pleasant to look back at him, at that confident forehead, as smooth as a girl's, broad, rounded outwards like a young child's. He was short and carried his head high. He had a quiet voice. All of him, his glance, his forehead, all his person, had this air of youth and a strict secret assurance.

Six months younger than the young Rienne, equally poor, equally without useful relations — his father was a farmer of the Beauce — he took Rienne under his protection, under the protection of his invincible innocence. He had the assurance of the child who laughs when he asks for something, certain that no one can refuse him anything he wants.

Since that time, he had grown hard and tough, like his ancestors about whom their neighbours said, "Those Olliviers would never die, if death didn't surprise them when they're not looking." So far Michel had kept his eyes open — in the last war his men joked, "He can see the bullets." But he had suffered — there are sorrows it is not so easy to dodge as death. He was known for his mulishness, his intractable intellect. Yet, in the first instant of seeing him, what you saw was still the young man's air of assurance, childlike, secret, the candour, the rounded forehead, the head lifted without conceit to look up.

In 1917 Rienne was severely wounded on the Chemin des Dames, and he took with him into his drugged half-death the frightful humiliation of seeing his company fall back broken. He opened his eyes on Ollivier's look of loving assurance. "It's you," Rienne said. "But of course it's me. . . ." Rienne fell asleep. It was only weeks later, when he returned to his battalion, he learned that Ollivier at the time was being rushed to the base hospital for an operation, and by sheer force of spirit had made them take him to Rienne's bed. . . . "I don't know why, but it was impossible to refuse him. . . ."

What other men could not refuse him, life did easily. He had married in his village: his son was born in December 1915, and when the letter from his father-in-law came he

hurried to Rienne with the news. "And think, Bonamy — if I'm killed there'll be someone to shout back when a boy yells 'Hi, Ollivier' in the street in the evening." But his son, when the letter reached him — letters in war-time never bring news, only anecdotes of the past — had been dead for five days and his wife for three. . . . He did well in the war ; and he was refused his promotions after he became colonel because of his obstinacy in sticking to tanks. The more his tanks were despised, the more he clung to them. . . . He was now forty-seven, thick-set, a little slower — his family had rheumatism from force of habit — but his friend could still surprise in him the child delighted to hope, the young man full of candour and assurance. Just as, when he remembered him, it was the young man who came — and would always come — even when they were both retired colonels, old men smiled at behind their backs for their fads.

By now there was a veil of heat over the distance, over the blue sky. It muted sounds, too. The noise of the traffic, of a motor horn, voices, were all muffled by a fine wadding of heat. Rienne walked along the Quai d'Angers in a silence through which he could hear only country sounds — the bees under an acacia, a cock crowing, two doves answering each other behind a wall. He had never felt happier. He moved through this life within a life with as easy a lightness as he would feel on the last day of the war. An expectancy as sharp — It's finished. Now to begin.

On this, the south side of the Loire, everything was calm, civilised, nothing jarred, the scent of the acacias was just noticeable ; everything was in proportion : of the shabby houses along the embankment none was too tall for its neighbours, none pushed itself forward ; although it was close on noon the light falling from the sky was matched deliciously by the cooler light rising from the river ; everything spoke the language of Anjou, of France. A gun on this side of the river pointed north, towards barbarism. A soldier on duty had a look of Lucien Sugny, the same large peasant hands, the same blue eyes, fixed and stubborn.

Rienne crossed the bridges. He walked the five hundred-odd yards, passing the ends of five or six narrow side streets, to the house — almost the last house on this side of Seuilly, the side facing the enemy — where Colonel Ollivier had his headquarters. The first thing Ollivier said to him had to do with the enemy. He said it as he came out of the room

at the back — it was dark in these rooms with one window, high in the wall, so that the light fell first on his forehead, bulging above his thick body: he held himself straight, without stiffness.

"It's you. Where are the Boches?"

"They will be held on the Somme," Rienne said.

Ollivier came close to him and shouted. He was angry. "Why don't they send for us? Why am I being kept down here? Seuilly is stuffed to the house-tops with troops, tanks, munitions. Are we waiting until the Boches reach us? What's up?"

"Have you read Gamelin's order of the day?" Rienne asked gently.

Ollivier repeated it in a sing-song voice. "*Victory or death: it must be victory.* Ought I to tell my men to get their copybooks and write it out a hundred times? A military exercise, eh? Who does he think he's talking to, your Gamelin? Not to me. It looks as though no one had any use for me and my tanks."

"General Gamelin is going to be sacked. He has been sacked," Rienne said softly. "Weygand will be in charge."

After a moment Ollivier said, "Weygand is a tolerably good wine. But he's been in the cask rather long. That's my opinion. Tell me the truth, Bonamy. What are they thinking about — your old Piriac, your old Woerth, your charming old Ligny? Perhaps they've been forgotten. G.H.Q. — where is it, by the way? — may think as poorly of them as they do of my tanks."

At last it's my turn to reassure you, Rienne thought. He gripped his friend by the shoulder and tried to shake him — he might as well have seized the trunk of a tree.

"This is the army of the Loire. It will strike when the time comes."

"You think so?"

"I'm certain," Rienne said calmly.

"You mean it will defend the Loire. But why not defend the Loire on the Somme? You don't defend the Loire on the Loire, you defend it precisely on the Marne or the Somme! Or, if it's too late for that, on the Seine. On the Loire you defend the Pyrénées. Or nothing at all."

"Or France," Rienne said.

Ollivier laughed. "You're always the same."

"At my age even that's something," Rienne said.

"At your age!" his friend cried. "You're forty-eight. I'm forty-seven and a half. We're colonels — it's not so bad. As for me" — he struck his forehead — "I shall die a colonel. Because of my tanks. After this war they'll retire me — 'What a pity you took up tanks, old boy, you might have got on!' The idiots." He laughed, in the best of humours now. "You, you'll get on. You'll die a general."

"No," Rienne said, smiling. "I'm stuck. They don't like me."

"You mean Woerth doesn't," Ollivier shouted. "He'll die."

Rienne smiled. "I have the same chance."

"War, lovely war," Ollivier cried joyously. "It includes all the chances. To be promoted, to be killed, to live to be old. And we owe it to having to fight the Boche every twenty years! Poor sinners of Boches. What's wrong with them? They have excellent wine, their wives have children, they have mountains, not such bad ones, and they have the sun, not like poor devils of countries where all they have is whisky and fog. In fact they have nearly all we have — apart from their ugly mugs. Why aren't they content?"

"You've forgotten — we weren't always so content."

But Ollivier was inexorable this morning for the Boches. "They've had as much chance as we have to learn better. I have my ideas. The fact is they behave in this way because they don't exist. There are no Germans, there is no Germany; there are Rhinelanders, Württembergers, Bavarians, Saxons — my God, what half-witted scoundrels! — the Prussians — what brutes! — but no Germans. Some idiot — my God, wasn't it Bismarck? — put it into their heads to be Germans. And it hasn't come off! You can't beget a child or make a family by marching, waving flags, and quarrelling with the neighbours. I'll tell you how to make a family. You must stay quietly in the same place for a hundred years — at least a hundred; you must polish carefully a revolting old chair because it belonged to a great-grandfather who was a hero, though you don't know exactly what it was he did — or you know very well and it's better not to say too much about it; you must keep hanging up a mirror you can't look into, it's gone perfectly black; you must be conceived, conceive, and die in the same bed, always the same bed, so much the worse for your heir —

naturally the mattress is remade now and then — what was I saying? Yes, yes, that's a family. There was a Rhenish family, a Bavarian family — and all the others. There is no German family. So every twenty years they have to yell, 'Germans, we are Germans', and rush murderously at us poor peasants, us poor French — who know perfectly well what a family is. We shall never have peace until the very name of German and Germany is forgotten, and there are only good Rhinelanders and the rest. I insist on Rhinelanders. They have very good wine, and like me they talk nonsense. . . ."

"We French," Rienne said, "are two families. Not one. Two. And we quarrel."

"You are right," Ollivier shouted. "You are always right. I won't listen to you."

Rienne frowned as though he were smiling. "Very well. I'll only say this — one of our two families is France, the others are at any rate Frenchmen. So — whatever happens in this war — France will go on."

Ollivier was silent, by the same instinct that would keep him lying still if he were wounded.

"So you are not sure," he said at last.

"I am sure," Rienne said.

Ollivier looked at him with the young man's candour he kept in reserve, and said softly,

"I am sure of myself, I'm not a coward. I am sure of you. Of my men. Of most of them. Of them all. I'm not sure of anything else."

"You're not asked," Rienne said lovingly, "to be sure of anything else."

He delivered his message from the general, and left. As he recrossed the Loire he heard a faint vibrant noise a long way off — artillery practice, no doubt. Or it was the great bow of the Loire itself, drawn taut against the barbarian invasion. Half-closing his eyes, he saw it stretched in front of the vulnerable heart of France, springing upwards from the sea as high as Orléans — *Orléans, qui êtes au pays de Loire* — and wound tightly round volcanic mountains in the south-east. Such a bow is not slackened without treachery.

Taking one way to the barracks he passed the small twelfth-century church of St. Nicholas. He had time, and went in. He made his prayer not for any person or for forgiveness, but for the one word that was as new as this

church. The word Ur, the word Mycenae, had fallen into silence, without the world being any the worse for it. But the word France must go on, since the whole world had been waiting for it, for this frail new point piercing a young branch, smelling of the leaf, of autumn, promising Chartres and Tours, and foreknowing or remembering Ronsard, Hugo, Péguy, the battle of the Marne, Verdun. All this, which was still hidden in the future, still wrapped in the fresh bud, must not be lost. Nor must a word be lost that hid in itself the poorest village — with its single dusty square, its single café, its poor and tremendous church, seeming so much too large for such a small village, and in fact scarcely large enough to accommodate so many dead. The word for Thouédun, for instance.

Chapter 28

THAT evening Rienne tricked Mathieu into coming out with him to Thouédun. He pretended only to have time to talk to him there. The truth was he wanted to force Mathieu to idle. And the evening — balancing the morning — was perfect, a coolness imitating the coolness of early morning, a barely credible blue of the evening sky answering the improbable blue of noon. During these weeks, so unlucky for France, you could believe that nature, whom the French have obeyed more loyally than any other people — letting her rage in their habits like a green sap, leaving their lawns untrimmed, devoting the lives of ten or twenty generations to improve a vine — nature was trying to compensate them for what was coming. Like a mother promising everything to her dying son.

But, of all that generosity of flower and light, Mathieu noticed nothing, nothing at all. His passion for France was a passion for an idea. If you reminded him that the Idea had clothed itself in the wheat of the Beauce, in certain delicious rivers, in vines, in the warmth and lime trees of the Dordogne, he would have agreed as one agrees with a child that the sand running through his fingers is gold. He

was born, had lived all his life, and was determined to die among the wide clear valleys of Loire, Cher, Indre, Vienne, springing with trees and superb buildings, yet nowhere terrible or grandiose ; he was living in that part of France where the ideal of the just measure is perfectly realised, between the young Indre, the young Loir, and the adult Loire ; cradled by Indre and Loir, blessed by Loire ; in a light at once calm and joyous, able to drink at their sharp point of savour and delicacy the wines of Touraine and Anjou — and he was indifferent to all of it. What he never forgot was that he had been born in a part of France where more harvests have been ruined by war than in any other, at cross-roads the Romans themselves had found to be important, and on the seam, the strong seam, joining the north and south of France. He was not indifferent to the scent of history. He could recite the names of older children of this courageous and always polite region : Gregory and Alcuin of Tours, Charles of Orléans, Rabelais, Joachim du Bellay, Ronsard, Descartes, Alfred de Vigny, but his ears were deaf to their words. He had not even noticed yet that the donjons of the castles, like the feudal walls themselves, had flowered airily with windows and sculptures and adorned themselves with lawns reflected in the clear moats.

They were at Rienne's house in time for supper. Mlle Agathe looked at Mathieu with pity. She could not detect on him any marks made by a woman, not even a mother. This decided her to sit down with them to the meal. Never would she bring herself to sit at table with Bonamy's other friends, but it was obvious with this one that he would notice her less than a chair. She listened.

Mathieu was complaining that he had been restricted to a single sheet for the *Journal*, although Derval, "that salacious little nincompoop", still had four pages for his *New Order*. Sometimes, for good measure, six.

Rienne smiled. "He speaks for at least four interests — the Mayor, our respected deputy, Monsieur Huet, Monsieur de Thiviers, and himself. The two extra are for Mussolini. You, my poor Louis, only speak for the truth."

"I speak for common Frenchmen," Mathieu said harshly. Agathe could not help smiling, she who had been a peasant, at this boast. "But I lie to them. That is, I don't tell them the truth. I'm forbidden. Why? Why am I forbidden to tell them how near they are to being a

battlefield? When they see it for themselves they'll bolt. Is that what someone — *that* for the names! — wants?"

"But we're not going to be defeated," Rienne said placidly.

Agathe watched the words form themselves slowly on Mathieu's tongue, against all the pull of his heart. He said reluctantly,

"The German nation is a powerful machine."

"Then," her brother retorted, "it can't grow. It has neither roots nor sap."

Agathe used up all her courage to speak.

"It says, *There is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout. Though the root thereof wax old in the earth; yet through the scent of water it will bud.*"

"I was wrong to speak of Germany as a machine," Mathieu said, ignoring her. "There is a living Germany — which is nothing like us. It's truly a different species. In our air a mediaeval building grows shabby, like an old woman, but it tries to understand what's going on among the young people. Over there, it remains the age it was born, and the air round it is the air of the Middle Ages. Here there are no mysteries, except human mysteries of jealousy, hatred, love. In Germany a single tree isolated in the middle of a plain, a single stork flying above a house, is charged with magic. And how their old houses shine with newness, like their children with washing. And their rivers are colder than ours and their forests darker. On a blazing day in Munich I found a dozen places, gardens and cafés, where I needed my coat."

"You like Germany," Rienne said.

"The Germany I hate is murdering the Germany I loved," Mathieu said roughly.

"I have never felt the least wish to leave France," Rienne said, smiling. "The people everywhere else are really barbarians, aren't they? At best strangers. Of no importance unless they invade us. Be honest, Louis. There's no painting, architecture, or books worth bothering about in these countries? For a Frenchman?"

"The English know how to write," Mathieu said drily.

"But we have Montaigne and Hugo and Vigny," Rienne said. "What else can you possibly need?"

"There are a few good buildings in Germany and Italy."

"We have Chartres," Rienne said simply.

Mathieu looked at him with what on another face, more legible, would have meant affection. "How French you are!"

This was more than Agathe could bear. "Of course he is!" she cried. "Why not?"

Mathieu looked at her with respect. For the first time he noticed her angular body, as strong and stiff as an axe-handle, and worn to the hand of a good workman. She had been well used, or she had used herself. When she died she would lie as straight in the ground as a worn-out tool. God, if He concerns Himself with these things, would be able to say of her, "That must be one of my peasants from Anjou, they all have big straight bones." He asked her permission to talk about a delicate subject, one on which her advice would be useful. Agathe trembled with pride and shame.

"Of course," she murmured. "But I know nothing."

He looked directly at her brother. "You have some influence with Émile." He paused, and said, "With Bergeot" — as though he needed the support of the surname. "Is it stronger than Madame de Freppel's?"

Agathe felt this blow at her brother's happiness. She took back at once all the support she had momentarily given Mathieu.

"What do you mean?" Rienne said.

"I have proofs," Mathieu said slowly, "I have been given proofs, that she is too friendly with people who — whatever their profession — seem to have taken on a second, that of stopping the war."

"Is that a bad thing?" Agathe stammered.

"Defeat?" Mathieu said. "Surrender?"

Agathe was silent.

Rienne lifted his head. "Émile is too self-willed to be influenced by a woman."

"Are you a good judge of that?" Mathieu said coldly.

Agathe trembled so much that she could not hold her glass. If she must protect her brother she could only do it with one of her convictions, and they were not used to public life.

"My opinion," she said timidly, inexorably, "is that women should not influence men. A mother, a sister" — she did not dare speak of a wife or mistress — "is there to soothe him if he is hurt. If, for example, one of his experiments has gone wrong. Men must experiment, even if they

kill themselves, or others. Think of the awful trouble our Lord brought on His mother. The poor creature, how she must have suffered. And if Judas Iscariot had a sister, how she must have cried over his body when they brought it home — and tried to make it look peaceful. If you ask my opinion — Monsieur Mathieu asked it — the world is no better for women running about in it as they do. It would be better if they kept quiet, and simply loved.”

Her brother and his guest both smiled at her. She saw that they smiled with so much kindness because they thought she was an ignorant old woman, and for the first time in her life — and the last — she felt that she was wiser than they were. The feeling shocked her so deeply that she left the table and took over to the window the sheet she was mending. You can't darn fine linen except in a mood of humble self-abandon.

Rienne was not staying the night in his house. He and Mathieu walked back. It was ten o'clock, not yet dark, but all the life had withdrawn from the daylight, there was no feeling any more confidence in it. The air up here now was fresh ; a young blackcock came to the edge of a field : he must have guessed that the poachers in the village had all been sent to the Maginot. Rienne walked very slowly.

From the foot of the hill they took a short cut through the farm belonging to a peasant proprietor called Viard. Jean Viard. There was no more nearly complete property on the Loire. Like Noah, Viard had provided himself with a sample of everything. Near the house he had vegetables and wall trees of pears and figs ; vines at the other side of his wheat, an apple orchard, meadows running down to the stream, a workshop where he repaired his own tools. Beyond the house, in a square of grass bordered by young poplars — the only trees in the estate that bore merely for themselves — were the tombs of his two sons : they had died of their wounds after the last war ; his sense of possession was so strong that he would not hand them over to the church, to other, earlier Viards of the commune. His one living child was a daughter. He had brought in two young nephews from outside, from Bourges ; in a few years they were bored and went off to work in a factory in Paris. After that he closed his doors against strangers, even of his family.

He had been walking across his fields. He halted before he reached Rienne and Mathieu and looked at them from

his sunken eyepits with an air of coldness and irony. He had imagination, this peasant. He was not only a block of ignorance, good sense, tradition. If he had wanted it he could have played a part in local politics. In a revolutionary army, such as the first army of Napoleon, he would have made his fortune and taken good care not to fall with his master. . . . But he had too much sense to step out of his own place in a society dominated by civilians whose tricks he could not understand.

He was short-sighted. As soon as he recognised Rienne he became friendly and, for him, trustful.

"Monsieur Mathieu — he edits the *Journal*," Rienne said.

"Ah, Monsieur Mathieu," Viard repeated, on a note of irony. "I read you. You're in a panic about this war."

"We could lose it," Mathieu said.

"You think so?" Viard said. "And do you think that will affect me? I've paid my widow's mite." He turned his head towards the field where he had buried his sons.

"You don't," Rienne said, "want Germans here giving you orders."

"No one gives me orders," said Viard. "The Germans can come. This is where I live, I drink my own wine, I don't open my door to people I don't like. Let them come, your Germans. They won't keep me awake. They'll have to shoot me to get me out — and what good would that do them? Who else could work this farm practically alone? I have three women and one broken-down old fool. My son-in-law has been in Alsace since before the harvest. Why Alsace? Do I want Alsace? I tell you, Monsieur Mathieu, if I had been in charge there would not have been war. Who profits in a war? Men who work in towns, who despise me, who make fun of me — what is it they say? *as stupid as a peasant*. They say that, and they depend on me! Who feeds them? Me. Jean Viard. And they could only work forty hours a week! My dear sir, when I read that, I knew who it was crucified Jesus Christ. Not poor peasants. Not peasants from Galilee. But men living in the town. The lazy thieving rats!"

"Monsieur Viard," Mathieu said, "what are you afraid of?"

"Afraid? I? Who are you talking to?" The lines on Viard's face, the arched line of his nose, became cruel.

kill themselves, or others. Think of the awful trouble our Lord brought on His mother. The poor creature, how she must have suffered. And if Judas Iscariot had a sister, how she must have cried over his body when they brought it home — and tried to make it look peaceful. If you ask my opinion — Monsieur Mathieu asked it — the world is no better for women running about in it as they do. It would be better if they kept quiet, and simply loved.”

Her brother and his guest both smiled at her. She saw that they smiled with so much kindness because they thought she was an ignorant old woman, and for the first time in her life — and the last — she felt that she was wiser than they were. The feeling shocked her so deeply that she left the table and took over to the window the sheet she was mending. You can't darn fine linen except in a mood of humble self-abandon.

Rienne was not staying the night in his house. He and Mathieu walked back. It was ten o'clock, not yet dark, but all the life had withdrawn from the daylight, there was no feeling any more confidence in it. The air up here now was fresh ; a young blackcock came to the edge of a field : he must have guessed that the poachers in the village had all been sent to the Maginot. Rienne walked very slowly.

From the foot of the hill they took a short cut through the farm belonging to a peasant proprietor called Viard. Jean Viard. There was no more nearly complete property on the Loire. Like Noah, Viard had provided himself with a sample of everything. Near the house he had vegetables and wall trees of pears and figs ; vines at the other side of his wheat, an apple orchard, meadows running down to the stream, a workshop where he repaired his own tools. Beyond the house, in a square of grass bordered by young poplars — the only trees in the estate that bore merely for themselves — were the tombs of his two sons : they had died of their wounds after the last war ; his sense of possession was so strong that he would not hand them over to the church, to other, earlier Viards of the commune. His one living child was a daughter. He had brought in two young nephews from outside, from Bourges ; in a few years they were bored and went off to work in a factory in Paris. After that he closed his doors against strangers, even of his family.

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"Monsieur Viard," Mathieu said, "what are you afraid of?"

"Afraid? I? Who are you talking to?" The lines on Viard's face, the arched line of his nose, became cruel.

"To a rich farmer," Mathieu said coolly. "To a farmer who made money in the Great War. . . . Don't tell me you haven't a sackful of bank-notes and defence bonds. You're afraid of losing it."

The look on Viard's face changed. No, it was not a look of cruelty; it was the hardness and railing patience of Anjou: this land which grows a strong eager wine and scandal-loving peasants.

"And my sons?" Viard said.

"Were they the only ones?"

"I sold them, eh?" Viard said. "Listen, Monsieur Mathieu: in my young Denis's company ten workmen were recalled to work in the factories. They got good wages. My son — and the other peasants — stayed where they were and got their deaths. That's all. And now . . ."

"And now you're for anyone who will promise you peace and your property," Mathieu said. His voice was inconceivably harsh.

"That's enough," Rienne murmured.

Viard laughed. Jerking his thumb at Mathieu, he said,

"Don't worry yourself, Colonel. I and this gentleman aren't soft, we don't show marks." He stretched his arm out as though it could embrace the fields and the orchard. "Here," he said tenderly, "we have everything — except men. The garden of the world. My God, I'm for anyone who'll make Frenchmen do the work they were invented to do. Let the others rot in factories."

His voice altered again.

"And let them starve there, by God!"

A child had come out from the house; a little boy, thin, sunburned. He stood close to Viard, listening with the absorption of a child who is always with adults and has to keep himself in place in the middle of so many strong currents. His thin shoulders moved slightly like fins.

"My daughter's boy," Viard said. The bitterness dropped from his voice.

"Have you other grandchildren?" Rienne said.

"No. He will take on the farm."

Viard rested his hand on the narrow shoulders. The boy flinched a little under the weight of so much anger, prosperity, prudence, immovable will. The weight of ten generations of Viards, and the weight of the future.

From the Seuil road, Rienne glanced back. They were

still standing there, Viard and his grandchild, and now the child was scarcely visible apart from the old man's thick erect body. Only one of his hands stuck out; it held all he had of his own, all that was not family or inheritance.

Chapter 29

LABENNE watched his son — unseen by the boy or his tutor — at work. He had discovered in the wall of the room he had given them as a schoolroom a grating he could see through by getting up on a chair. On the pretence of placing the boy's desk nearer the light, he arranged it so that the angle of vision through the grating fell directly on them. He was not spying. He needed to keep an eye on the boy by the same instinct as a miser fingers his gold. With an intoxicating joy he heard Henry's voice — a deep voice for a boy of twelve — stumbling along the lines of the *Aeneid*, and saw his glance shift impatiently to the open window. How the boy hated to be shut up — but he was learning his Latin! He was the first stage in the refinement of sound peasant stock. He had the hands and body of a peasant, and he would have the manners of, at any rate, a mediaeval baron. He would know how to give orders. If his better-born wife found him uncouth, he would govern her. Labenne despised writers, but he was giving Henry the bare rudiments of classical knowledge so that he would not be at a loss in any society. The rudiments only. A young man who will inherit land and money needs other tricks more urgently.

He himself was teaching Henry the meaning and value of property. Labenne had no intention of trusting the future of his family to money. There must be money, but the earth it sprang from must be real earth — wheat, vineyards, mines.

He stepped down from the chair. His turbulent love of the boy had swollen in his stomach and he needed to walk about to become calm. His son was more than a fine boy. Henry was his stock, his roots in the ground of a province, his future. When Labenne thought about his son, he was

thinking of France. The future of France, the safety of France, was the same thing as Henry's safety, the safety of the virile Labenne stock. A narrow passion, raging the more deeply. The real passion of his life. His cool pleasure in his power to play the god with people and society only served it. Without scruples, the Talleyrand of a province, he used his brute of an intellect to serve his loyalty to France, that is, to his son.

Putting on his jacket, he went off to the Prefecture, to attend an unofficial Committee of Civil Defence called by Bergeot. It promised to amuse him. There, with the Prefect, he found General Piriac, M. de Thiviers and Mathieu. Thiviers was standing up, his elegance pressed in relief against a window; he had the air of a good man condescending to be good company. It was too much for Labenne: to show his contempt he undid the buttons of his shirt on a growth of black sweating hair. He settled himself to watch Bergeot.

Confidently, without too much emphasis — as if he hoped to slide them past any doubts, Bergeot outlined his plans for communal feeding if the town were disorganised by raids, for the control of shelters, for information posts where citizens would be advised, for sending away at short notice children, invalids, old people. He was precise and eloquent. Labenne saw that he had involved his soul in the scheme; he would be mortally hurt if it were rejected. Coldly, like a surgeon able to read disease in the patient's gestures, he noted that Bergeot was honestly afraid of failure. Failure to him was disgrace, and disgrace moral death.

The moment Bergeot finished, Labenne said,

"Splendid, my dear chap, splendid. A magnificent scheme."

He watched the effect of his praise. I've made him feel that he can sway anyone, he thought cruelly.

Piriac was speaking. He spoke slowly, in a voice of extreme bewilderment. Behind the bewilderment, a spinal column in the confusion and slowness of his mind, he had the massive assurance of his own integrity. Labenne could put his fingers on the nodes of this spine — loyalty, belief in God, disinterest, simple cunning. He despised an integrity which is at the mercy of less scrupulous men. What virtue is there in it, if it can be defeated — if I can defeat it? He felt a raging contempt for soldiers. They were only good

for fighting. And war — if it is anything but devilry — is simply the confession of a failure. How Piriac quavered!

"Seuilly will be defended . . . of course . . . if the Germans reach the Loire . . . but they won't reach the Loire. If they do, it is — perhaps — the end. . . ."

During this display Labenne turned his gaze on Mathieu. He felt a shock in the centre of his body, as if he had slipped when he was crossing a plank bridge. His mind slid off Mathieu's. That icy surface gave him no foothold. Labenne knocked against a contempt and a lack of sensitiveness equal to his own. And because he felt that Mathieu was his equal in will-power, intellect, and even in cruelty — but what is cruelty when mere heaps of mud, water and a little energy are concerned? — he was able to hate him.

Piriac had stopped. Putting out all his charm, Bergeot said,

"My dear general, your advice, extremely——"

Labenne interrupted him brutally and coldly. "Mr. Prefect, your scheme is admirable. No doubt you've taken into account that as soon as you begin sending people away there will be panic. And nothing less than a riot if you ask them to declare their stocks of food."

"So you don't think it's worth trying to fight this war?" Mathieu said.

"What do you mean?" asked Labenne.

"I mean, Mr. Mayor, that if you won't prepare people to resist, you are preparing them to give in."

"You have a romantic idea of war," Labenne said.

"At least," Mathieu said, "it is an idea of war, not obviously an idea of defeat."

"Offer your advice to the General Staff," Labenne said contemptuously.

Mathieu smiled. "If I were on the General Staff I should lock you up, as a danger to public safety. Possibly, since I'm a romantic, as a traitor."

"And since you're not a Frenchman, but a Jew," Labenne said easily, "you're possibly less interested in the safety of France than in some other end of the war."

Mathieu answered with his normal coldness. "You may be confusing the safety of France with your own."

This terrible penetration, as arrogant as his own, struck Labenne. He did not let it be seen that he had been touched. Pursing his thick lips, he showed the whites of his eyes like

a clown, so that his threat might seem a joke.

"Don't count too much on the safety of an editor," he said.

Mathieu's indifference was not a pretence. He turned to the Prefect and said drily,

"Your scheme is a good one — and months too late."

Bergeot made no direct answer to this criticism. Instead he spoke to Labenne. "There's no need," he said, smiling, "to remind us that Monsieur Mathieu is a Jew. He has never pretended to be anything else — a landowner, for instance." His eyes sparkled as he delivered himself of this indiscreet quip. "If you'd been at school with him, as I was, you'd know his unparalleled knowledge of history."

It gave him acute pleasure to show Mathieu that he was magnanimous, the finer nature of the two. . . . You defeated me in the history class — and I'm defending you. . . . He disliked Labenne enough to enjoy taking a cut at him.

Labenne gave no sign of resentment, unless resentment is a triangle formed by two lines starting from a powerful nose, its nostrils masked by dense flesh, to arrive quickly at firm negroid lips : these lips were like the wrinkled pulp of a fruit. Unless you had watched closely you missed the very slight contraction of his pupils, so black and oily that they reflected neither light nor thoughts ; from inside and outside they were despotically guarded.

"You see yourself as the defender of Seully," he said coolly to Bergeot. "It is in ruins and burning, but you have arranged for only the able-bodied to be burned. Necessary, perhaps — but tell me how you propose to make them like your plan."

"By the simplest means," Bergeot said. "Tell me yourself what I ought to say to you to induce you to defend your new château. I take it you would object to handing it over intact to the Germans ?"

In his certainty of scoring a point, Bergeot was blind to the effect on Labenne. Labenne lowered his eyelids. Behind them, and behind his anger, he made a note of Bergeot's pleasure in using the cutting edge of his tongue. If in due time I want to punish him, he reflected, I can do it through his vanity.

Mathieu interrupted to ask why their deputy was not with them.

"Monsieur Huet has gone back to Paris," Bergeot said.

"Perhaps just as well," Labenne said quietly. "Are you sure of Ernest Huet? Isn't he possibly a — defeatist?"

He was less concerned to harm Huet than to see whether anyone would defend him. It amused him coldly that no one did. Poor blackguard! he thought. From the corner of his eye he saw Piriac fumbling stiffly in the pockets of his tunic. Heaven save me, he's going to read a speech on Joan of Arc, he thought. Turning to the Prefect quickly, he said,

"What do you expect from me in your scheme?"

Before Bergeot could speak, M. de Thiviers leaned across the table. He was determined to offer himself as a sacrifice between two duellists. He smiled — with the embarrassment and sublimity of the martyr riddled with arrows. When he began speaking it seemed he was for all sides. Bergeot — "our noble Prefect" — must carry out his scheme, but in secret, without alarming anyone. He must tell the citizens about their danger, and be reassuring . . . "a difficult task, but just your size, my dear Prefect. . . ." Watching his admirable manner and catching in his voice all the modulations of an experienced diplomat, Labenne felt more wounded than he had been by Bergeot's quips. Bergeot, after all, had grown up with the same village mud on his shoes. Opening his shirt still more widely, Labenne scratched his armpits, sniffing up their odour, and yawned. Stubs of teeth, all quite healthy and nearly black, guarded a grossly thick tongue.

Bergeot said sharply,

"Then you all — all — support me if I carry on in the most discreet way possible."

"Given the discretion," Thiviers said, smiling.

"Naturally," Labenne said, "you have my fervent support."

Made suspicious by so much warmth, Mathieu looked at him, and encountered a glance in which he could read neither sincerity nor guile: used as he was to piercing the weakness or corruption of human beings, he recoiled from it. He felt himself at the edge of a bog. Without being in the least shocked, he realised that he had under-estimated Labenne.

"Discretion is very well in its place," he said contemptuously. "Would you, Monsieur de Thiviers, call an officer indiscreet in obeying orders to hold an untenable position?"

"We're only poor devils of civilians," Labenne said with a smile.

He saw that Piriac had managed to squeeze a document of some sort from his pocket. The old general's weak heavy voice surprised them. They had forgotten him. He spoke with the authority of a general addressing soldiers; in spite of themselves, his listeners, even Labenne, sat to attention under the pressure of words let fall singly, with long intervals of silence. Even the commonplaces of an old general have behind them the weight of so many deaths, so much decent rigour.

"Gentlemen," he said, "whatever our differences of outlook we are all Frenchmen. . . ." Then, without paying the least attention to his audience, he read one of the speeches he always delivered in front of monuments of the last war. In its hollowness and insensitivity it was suited to a monument. He must have been feeling one at his back when he talked of saving French youth and French towns and villages from a disaster he placed vaguely in the future — as if what was happening at this minute, on the soil itself of the last war, was only a repetition, a play written about that war, and acted by young men who were pretending to cry out, pretending to suffer, pretending to fall on their knees like poor beasts. And to lie still.

It was the same when he began to talk about honour. He said, "The honour of our country . . ." but talked about obedience, resignation. . . . Just as he had confused the real young men with their ghosts, so now he confused their duties. His left hand lay on the table, inert, like a dead hand. Like the hand of one of the young men.

Labenne reflected. What the devil is he rehearsing? he wondered.

Chapter 30

LABENNE and Thiviers came away from the Committee together. It was eight o'clock now, but not a breath of air troubled the heat. Always, from morning to dusk, this heat stretched itself from edge to edge of the horizon, without a

break. It was too hot for the young vines, Labenne grumbled. Too hot, Thiviers murmured, for marching — for those two had to march. Labenne shrugged his shoulders. Excellent for the German tanks, he growled.

They were passing the ancient houses driven into the wall of the cliff. The upper half of every door was open. A sort of life — impossible to see what sort — threshed about in there. You saw a hand holding a casserole, a woman's face, the maggot-like forms of children. The whole moved like an ant-heap seen from the outside ; it was a disturbance, a threat, rather than life itself. Labenne felt himself fastened to each of these darkened rooms by a nerve starting from his loins. He knew to its last sprig of chive what the soup tasted of in the casserole, he felt the dampness, even in this warmth, of walls thrust into the soil at their back. An infant plumped its bare bottom on the floor and Labenne felt the mingled shock and joy of meeting the rough stone.

He glanced at Thiviers. Thiviers's long face wore a smile of pure benevolence, the smile of a saint. He was completely isolated from these rooms and their life ; neither his brain nor his body brought him news from them : there had never been a connection. His benevolence operated in the void.

His car was waiting at the foot of the narrow road. He turned the smile round on to Labenne. " Let me drive you home."

It was an immensely roomy car. Inside, shut off by a glass wall from the chauffeur, the two men allowed themselves an air of intimacy. You saw that they knew each other better than appeared in public. It was none the less an air of intimacy, not the thing itself.

" I'm not altogether out of sympathy with your distrust of Mathieu," Thiviers said. It was almost a declaration.

Labenne was sprawling in his seat : his head left a dark patch on the linen covers.

" Louis Mathieu ? He's an enemy of society."

" Because he denies everything," Thiviers said gently. " No Jew has faith."

Yawning, Labenne gave himself no trouble to pick his words. " The best sort of State would be one where the rulers were all atheists and realists, and the mob lousy with religion."

M. de Thiviers looked grave. " There is a higher

realism." He smiled the same gentle kindly smile. "My dear Labenne, you understand that. You with your sound patriotism — as sweet as our soil."

Labenne half closed his eyes. How you dislike me, he thought. But you think I'm going to be useful to keep the mob off you and your money. Perhaps. . . . Under his eyelids he watched Thiviers spread over his knees a handkerchief made of a linen more delicate than silk; it had his crest in one corner and in another his initials. . . . I suppose I smell, Labenne thought, smiling. At least I don't smell of hypocrisy. . . . He let his mind leap like a wolf on the man beside him. This banker turned philosopher and writer. This patriot whose love of France took the form of rushing from capital to foreign capital, Rome, Berlin, New York — no Labenne had ever travelled more than a few miles from his village until Georges Labenne stretched the nerve as far as Seuilly and Paris. . . . Paris — what a hole! . . . And in each of these foreign cities — far from, as a Labenne would have done, despising everything which was not like France — he lent himself eagerly to the worship of all the most obviously and aggressively foreign elements. In Italy he allowed them to make him honorary colonel of a Black Shirt regiment. In Berlin he returned the salutes of the S.S. guard of honour sent to meet his train. Inhibited, an ascetic who preferred to drink water, he accepted invitations to the banquets — they were orgies — offered by Goering. And I, I should have accepted, Labenne thought; I should have sat beside that big active brute — my God, no fool — and out-drunk, out-stuffed, out-boasted him. But I should not have come back to Paris with stories of his delicacy, good faith, and the rest of it. . . . Our friend Thiviers — an evangelist, eh? So pious that he put his arms round the atheist Goebbels and went with him to a Nordic marriage — fertility rites, eh? And gassed to Ribbentrop about peace, when Ribbentrop was entertaining him with a display of ten thousand tanks, a hundred thousand machine-guns, twenty thousand aeroplanes, and what and what and what. A banker, eh? Good at sums. An emissary, a writer. All that equals peace, eh? Do de da, Monsieur de Thiviers — your air of modesty, modesty in extremis, is equal to extreme conceit: you really believed that your talks and journeys were cementing friendship, you believed that Monsieur Hitler was opening his heart to you over fifty cups of tea. . . . And you

live in a luxurious house, and compose there your poor little pieces about poverty, suffering, simplicity. Your modesty doesn't allow you to wear your orders or mention your charities : you have to provide yourself with an indiscreet clerk when you give away a hundred thousand francs to the Abbey Church. . . .

As to that, Labenne intended to be infinitely richer than Thiviers, and not simply in money. He felt that Thiviers was unstable. Worse. He had seen Thiviers's family house near Luynes, with the superb view over the Cher and the Loire, and it looked neglected. Thiviers had had the chance to buy land which was cutting into his family land, and let it go. Instead he bought more paintings, more costly junk for his house in Seully and his Paris flat. This, to Labenne, was pure wickedness.

Thiviers stopped the car to buy an evening paper.

"The Germans have reached the Aisne."

Labenne said nothing. This bell tolling back through all the passages and corridors of French history made no echoes for him.

"Do you know what I hope?" Thiviers said simply. "That we shall go back to an earlier France. And a much juster! With the justice of the saints. Men would still work diligently in the fields, sow, harvest the vines, prune. Diligence! It used to be the French virtue. We must return to having children. If we are to have a future as noble as our past."

Tuppence for your future, Labenne thought; you and your sterile wife and your no children. You're too long — all wood and airs and no sap. He said warmly,

"You're the only man who will be listened to in the Department. Your name and influence——"

Not altogether bad for us, a religion of sacrifice! Very well — preach it, my good Thiviers. You have my blessing. And the odium — after a time the sacrificed always kick — which will attach itself to you. That's justice. Of the saints! . . . In the early years of their political alliance — still hidden from the electors of Seully — it was Labenne who did the unpopular things. . . . It's time, he thought, good-tempered and mocking, for you to pay the bill you've been running up on my patience. With my stomach I shall make a charming saint. . . .

"Let's have this out," he said maliciously. "Are you

still supporting our dear Prefect, or not ? ”

“ Within reason,” Thiviers answered.

“ Don’t give yourself away,” Labenne mocked. “ How within reason ? What does it mean ? ”

M. de Thiviers explained in a gentle voice — Bergeot was brilliantly clever, ambitious, a man of the people . . .

Labenne interrupted him. “ And therefore useful — and possibly dangerous. So you meant to seduce him into serving your turn. Very wise.”

“ I wonder if I deserve your praise,” M. de Thiviers said, smiling. He went on with great simplicity, “ Bergeot — I’m sure of it — is a good fellow, a patriot. We’re going through a moral crisis. All classes must draw closer together to heal the mistakes and injustice of the past.”

“ We only needed that,” Labenne said, turning his eyes up.

“ What ? ”

“ The moral crisis. My dear Thiviers, it’s property that’s threatened ! It’s us.”

“ Quite ! And property is the stay and stem of our morals. A peasant with half an acre of vines is a patriot. It’s your politicians and journalists, with nothing under them but their salaries, who are irresponsible, corrupt, who are immoral.”

Labenne looked at him with a deep admiration. All your fears for your money are hidden by this superb mask of virtue, he thought. And you’re truly superb. How I should like to peel you to your dry skeleton. . . . A doubt, in the same moment, pinched him. He doubted whether Thiviers was a hypocrite. . . . Isn’t he precisely virtue itself, kindness itself, piety itself ?

The mask must be the man, and the man the mask. Behind it there was only the personal void, sucked dry of the juice of life : outside it, that living Europe, torn, agonised, which Thiviers refused to see. Tell him about yesterday’s air raid on Rheims, and he’ll fly off to read an account of the Gauls sacking Rome — which will distress him bitterly. . . . In fact, the least bearable thing about Thiviers was his genuineness. . . . Thank God, he hasn’t passed on his dry blood to a child, Labenne thought.

He jerked himself forward.

“ Put me down at the offices of the *New Order*,” he said impatiently. “ I’ve things to see to.”

Chapter 31

DERVAL was writing about the reconstruction of Europe. He brushed aside the problems that had baffled the makers of the Versailles Treaty, and was shifting boundaries, deporting whole districtsful of peasants, turning the age-old courses of rivers, with his usual enthusiasm. When Labenne came into the room he brought in with him the smells of earth, clover, sweat. He had a pink clover in his buttonhole. In the second before he came the floor had been strewn with dismembered fragments of Europe : now there was nothing in it except Labenne and a little dust.

"I've come," Labenne announced, "from an absolutely secret meeting at the Prefecture. Absolutely secret, you understand. I'll give you an account of it."

He had an incredibly good memory. With his distrust of writing he never made notes, and he could remember the prices fetched by the vintages of the last twenty years, and the size to a yard of every estate in the neighbourhood, and the incomes and private lives of every person he knew. Dried, pressed and labelled, their precious secrets took up very little room. He had only to read a dossier to memorise it. With one exception. If you did him a bad turn he remembered about your malice only its weight : a good turn — and he noted carefully how far he could rely on your weakness in the future.

He gave Derval a word-by-word report of the Committee — with commentary.

"... the heavens opened and Monsieur de Thiviers descended, having the moral crisis in his beak. You young fool, you're going to tell me you've prepared several leaders on the moral crisis. You can tear them up. France is always on its way to a moral crisis. They're our speciality. . . . I spit on the moral crisis, d'y'see ? And on all the quotations from Messrs. Renan, Victor Hugo, Gide — who the devil is Gide ? — which our dear Prefect, our dear commander-in-chief, our dear deputy, lard into their speeches. It's a bad habit to prop yourself up on these illustrious corpses. And don't talk to me about civilisation and the rest of it. From now on so far as the *New Order* is

concerned, *I am our glorious civilisation. And I'm innocent of all these stinking quotations.*"

"Monsieur Gide is still alive," Derval said timidly.

"So much the worse for him," Labenne said.

He sat down. He felt only contempt for Derval. The young man existed for him as a tool near his hand. With the natural result that when nobody except this screw-driver or paper-knife was in the room with him, his egoism swelled to its limits. There were a few moments when he was able to see France separate from himself, separate even from his family. Very few. When it was most loyal to him, Labenne's ego absorbed France like a peasant absorbing his five acres; he felt, in his toe or in the only tooth which was not sound, although it was as black as the others, the storm that was going to ruin a year's white wine.

"There are writers who are against war," Derval mumbled. "One could quote them." He was embarrassed by the thought of going about naked in future.

"D'y'think I'm a pacifist?" shouted Labenne. "What an idiot! War destroys property, doesn't it? Ergo, it destroys me. There would be something to be said for a war held in another country, I shouldn't weep about houses I don't own — and if we were the victors. But this war — which we've lost, which the Germans have won, which is ruining me — can you think of anything sane or likeable in it? It must be stopped . . . for the good of France. . . . Yes, that's where I am now. And I'm giving you your orders. You'll lard your columns — not with Monsieur Renan, he must be damnably dry now, my God — with melancholy. I want to see old gentlemen crying like calves over their copy of the *New Order*. You'll start a few good stories — no, no, I'll do that, I doubt if you have the right touch."

Derval had paled. "Then we've really lost the war? It's not only politics?" he said after a moment.

Labenne caught sight in Derval's mind of a flying spark of revolt, of decent defiance, of courage — in a word, of another France, not identical with himself. Of a France in which the Marne did not represent defeat, and the word Paris was not a synonym for disgrace and cowardice. He put his thumb on it.

"You've written a great deal about our political rottenness, haven't you? The need for social revolution and all that. Right. Revolutions are made by soldiers. *Our*

revolution is being made by German soldiers. It's simple."

"What about our own soldiers?" Derval stammered.

"They're the victims — so much the worse for them."

Derval was silent. Trying to get deeper into his mind Labenne was held up by a curiously formed shadow. Its shape baffled him. He couldn't know that it was cast by an old gentleman wearing a shabby frock-coat, arm-in-arm with another old gentleman in a toga.

"It's not only our soldiers," Derval muttered. "There'll be other French victims."

"Certainly. All the people who don't realise in time that we're living in the full light of the German conquest of Europe. Of the world!"

"Is that true?" Derval stammered.

"It's absolute truth. . . . It follows that those who march with the conquerors become conquerors." He looked coldly at Derval. "You can choose. I'm not responsible for you. D'you want to be victim or conqueror? To be dug under or go on living — in the sun, eating and drinking in the sun? I suppose you have a young woman. Well — choose whether you'll sleep with her or leave it to someone with more of his senses about him. Absent, forgotten, dead, — or alive and prosperous? If you choose to rot — I won't stand in your way."

The shadow across Derval's mind was withdrawing; it had become less dense. You could see through it — what? — images that were less significant for him — evidently, since they were fainter. There was a flicker of trees, perhaps limes; the smooth nap of a river, grey-green and wide, marked with patches of cloud like bruises; but the oddly human, single and not single form had almost disappeared.

"You know," Derval said slowly, "I'd realised that you were balancing the possibilities of defeat — what to do for the best, if we really did lose the war. And to safeguard your interests. That's merely prudent. . . . I hadn't realised that you think of the Germans like that. . . ."

What a fool! Labenne said to himself. That Derval thought this did not surprise him: he was amazed that the young man could be so childish as to say it aloud. He smiled and said calmly,

"You're very naïve, my young friend. . . . You can talk to me like this, because I know how to value your intelligence" — he made an appalling face — "I advise you to

be more reserved with others. And now try to understand me ! I want the end of the war to come quickly, because, yes, because it's inevitable. Think ! Think of these Germans, perfectly conditioned for war — down to boys of five, unmarried mothers, sterilised half-wits. Think of a nation which can afford to sterilise — because everything belongs to the State, even the virgin's womb. Europe is going to change its very skeleton. It's true. . . . We had our Maginot. What a farce — but some people made fortunes out of it. Very well, it's finished, and I have ideas for the future. I have a son. You're not going to tell me he isn't the future ? And I have my ambitions. . . . As you say, there will be victims. Touch me — do I smell like a victim ? ” He smiled again, with sudden candour. “ And you haven't the face of a victim, either, my child. Nor of a traitor.”

“ A traitor ? ” Derval echoed.

“ Certainly. Anyone who advises France to resist a day longer than necessary betrays her,” Labenne said in a cold voice.

Why am I bothering with this fool ? he asked himself. The answer was that he had a use for Derval ; and he enjoyed using his power over men, especially young men. He enjoyed peering into Derval's mind and seeing there only the light of a sudden conversion. That shadow, that other France, was dissolving, had been dissolved, in a freshly corrosive belief. Just as neatly quicklime would dissolve the bodies of the others, the victims. Poor bodies — weighted with the past, with ignorance, ill-luck, or with a loyalty which had lost its chance. From now on he could write on the wax of Derval's brain what he liked. Of all the Dervals.

He jumped up.

“ I'm ravenous.”

Chapter 32

WOERTH had been careful not to say at what hour on Sunday he meant to inspect the defences. His theory of discipline was simple and rigid : the fighting man is always ready, always at his best.

He left the barracks with Ligny at three in the afternoon, satisfied that the colonel in charge of the forward defence line had been expecting him for not less than six or seven hours. At the bridge, he dismissed his car in order to walk the rest of the way — another theory : to see his general on foot puts a new heart into the soldier at his best. Walking a few paces behind them in the blinding sunlight, Colonel Rienne reflected that this theory was like a number of others established by old generals, as infallible, as imbecile. Since the fighting man knows very well that the general is walking for only five and a half minutes, to see what it feels like.

Notably erect, out-facing, in their rôle of old campaigners, a fierce sun, they were like grasshoppers — military grasshoppers, if you like : Woerth slender, elegant, small ; Ligny tall and very thin, with a slight relaxation of his narrow shoulders marking just that degree of scepticism and humanity.

And the silence made itself noticed. The sun pinned to the ground — so that they lay there like the dead — the dog stretched in the centre of the deserted street, and the weak net of poor shabby houses. There was not even the drone of an aeroplane. A long way north-east from here and well out of hearing, a few French aeroplanes went up, survived, landed to suck in energy along the nerve joining them to the ground, took off, landed — until the moment when the nerve snapped and curled up. The airfield a mile to the east of Seully was quiet. No flurry there. No war. And it took some minutes of their walk for the war to break into an argument the two generals had begun in the car. Woerth set it off. He said that a man who was living, as Émile Bergeot was, an openly immoral life, was not fit to be in an official position. He would like to eliminate Mme de Freppel. Or get rid of the Prefect. He was speaking sincerely, in so far as disorderly habits, lack of discipline, revolted him. Out of kindness to Rienne, Ligny said that Bergeot had been a good Prefect.

"I suspect strongly that Madame de Freppel interferes with the administration," Woerth said. "An insult."

"To whom ?" Ligny asked, smiling.

"To a nation at war."

"Surely," Ligny said gently, "you exaggerate a little ?"

Woerth said coldly, "When millions of men are leading celibate lives, it's damaging and disgraceful for a responsible

be more reserved with others. And now try to understand me! I want the end of the war to come quickly, because, yes, because it's inevitable. Think! Think of these Germans, perfectly conditioned for war — down to boys of five, unmarried mothers, sterilised half-wits. Think of a nation which can afford to sterilise — because everything belongs to the State, even the virgin's womb. Europe is going to change its very skeleton. It's true. . . . We had our Maginot. What a farce — but some people made fortunes out of it. Very well, it's finished, and I have ideas for the future. I have a son. You're not going to tell me he isn't the future? And I have my ambitions. . . . As you say, there will be victims. Touch me — do I smell like a victim?" He smiled again, with sudden candour. "And you haven't the face of a victim, either, my child. Nor of a traitor."

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official, the civilian head of a Department, to sink into an irregular affair. When you get infection at the top, you can't say how far down it will go. They disgust me."

Ligny shrugged his shoulders. His own life had been as austere as Woerth's. But far from increasing, austerity had diminished any feeling he had that women are important. For perhaps the first time in his life — giving Rienne the measure of Ligny's affection for him — he tried to calm Woerth.

"A soldier must live like a monk. But a civilian?" — without knowing it, he gave away his involuntary contempt for civilians.

Woerth ignored his remark. "I begin to think that possibly I was wrong to visit her house. I did it entirely for the sake of public order. To keep an unbroken line of military and civilian authority. I was perhaps only spreading infection. The thought shocks me."

"It's less shocking than her dinners," Ligny said.

Rienne listened with an anxiety as simple as his logic. Since Émile had no legal wife, Mme de Freppel was his wife: Rienne did not care much for her, but he had adopted her as an intimate part of Émile's happiness; he had assumed — since Woerth dined with Émile at her house — that he, too, accepted the relation as natural and decent. And now what? He knew his Woerth well enough to be certain of this: if he had been dining with Mme de Freppel for political reasons and now feared that he had been wrong, it meant — his heart sank — that Émile's position was less secure than it looked. General Woerth was remarkably sensitive to changes of mood on the part of the future. He was always friendly with the general who was going up, abandoning at the very peak of his glory the one due to go down — before anyone else had picked up the faintest trembling of the air. And he was always right. When the new appointment came through, Woerth had been for some days, or only for some hours, on the winning side. His career in a military sense had been rather bare; by no wish of his own he had usually visited theatres of war just after or just before the curtain went up: politically, he was the greatest of living strategists. . . . Or else he had a genius for omens. . . . Obviously he read a change in Émile's future. Rienne frowned. Impossible to warn Émile on such evidence — as frivolous as the sight of a single magpie. He felt stupid with anxiety. Without knowing it, he fell back into the habits of their childhood,

and he was thinking of Émile as the good lively little foster-brother who so easily became terrified and unhappy.

Ligny had broken off the argument. A heavy sacrifice — but he knew that if he began to enjoy it he would lose any impulse to spare Rienne. He sighed, and began talking about General Weygand. Now that he was Commander-in-Chief and Chief of the General Staff the war would surely go better. Woerth only nodded. He was not going to be trapped into pronouncing for one side or the other, for or against Weygand, until he had fingered the entrails. He said in a grudging voice,

“At least he'll keep order.”

“He has been called in to make war,” Ligny said.

“We have a war on two fronts in our dish,” Woerth said. “Against the Germans and against disorderly elements at home. We're worse off than the Germans, they have only one front.”

“My advice to Weygand,” Ligny said calmly, “would be to stick to the one enemy.”

Woerth made his favourite gesture. He held out both hands, palm upwards, and moved them up and down, the scales of a balance. Rienne had seen him make this gesture at manoeuvres — he was weighing the weather; at a court-martial, with a soldier's poor life on the scales; in front of a cenotaph, where perhaps he had the living, the survivors, on one side, and the dead on the other — with all each of them weighed in light and darkness, heat and cold, the sun, and earth between the teeth.

“It remains to decide,” he said, “which of our enemies is the more dangerous.”

Ligny's shoulders moved across another degree of his private circle. “I'm old-fashioned. If someone talks to me about the enemy I look for him on the frontier . . . Just as when they talk about public morale I think of religion. . . . I don't like Germans.”

“Why should you?” Woerth said. “After all, you're civilised.”

“Good of you,” Ligny murmured.

“I dislike Germans with my instincts and mind,” Woerth said drily. “After all, I am a good Catholic. You are, too. . . . Reds I dislike with my heart. Did you suppose I have no heart?”

“It's not the Reds,” Ligny said in a soft voice, “who

have just taken Le Cateau and St. Quentin. And crossed the Sambre and the Oise — two of our most faithful rivers.”

Woerth said nothing. He held his head slightly to one side. He is waiting, Rienne thought, to be tipped off about the Seine and the Loire. Are they going to be disgraced, or promoted to be victories? The moment he gets word he'll know whether he ought to drop them. . . .

Ollivier glanced past General Woerth at his friend — a glance brief enough, he thought, to elude Woerth's net. He was mistaken. . . . Considering the time we've waited for him, his glance said, your great man might make himself pleasant. . . . Woerth's inspection was the most perfunctory imaginable. He walked back to Ollivier's headquarters in a silence he broke to ask Ollivier about his officers. Ollivier's answers were all obviously a little wide of what he wanted to find out: after each of them he looked fixedly past Ollivier's head to a point where he hoped to catch them from one side and correct the impression they were intended to give. At last he looked Ollivier in the face — in a leisurely way, as though comparing it with a passport photograph in his hand: peculiarities, the shrewd russet eyes, the convex forehead, the narrow lips with their little air of authority and patience.

“And you, what do you think? Are your officers in good heart?”

“No, sir.”

The general's eyebrows pretended to be surprised. “Explain yourself,” he said mildly.

“They don't like inaction, sir.”

Woerth's lips moved in his slight smile. You could wonder whether it was a smile or the relaxation of a muscle which had been on guard.

“And I suppose you share their feeling? Tell me, what would you like to see happen?”

The way Ollivier stood reminded his friend of Jean Viard in front of his house and his fields — the same stubbornness of shoulders and head. Ollivier was defending ideas he had nursed as jealously as any Viard his land. He saw Rienne's warning glance, and brushed it aside, with a contempt which said: Thank God, I'm not on the staff. “My opinion is—” he began. He went on, calmly, as though he were writing out an exercise for manoeuvres, with the same precision, the same anxiety to be clear. He explained what use the French tanks and aeroplanes would be — if G.H.Q.

decided to use them. He knew exactly which point of the advancing German column he would puncture with them. He knew — seeing them with their telegraph wires, elms, the oldest elms in the world, fleece of woods, villages sunk under the weight of Church, mairie, humble inns, *Commerce*, or *France*, strung along them like beads, or breaking off to shelter from the heat of late May in a fold of the earth — all the roads along which he would bring up armies from the south and east. “And in the meantime I would resist there,” he said, in his composed voice, “and here, and here” — using his hands to scoop out a hill and a river-bank. “I should be beaten but I would resist — for the sake of the time gained, and also the sake of resistance. For encouraging others. . . . My view is, that you can’t know what men are capable of until you order them to cling to the ground with their nails. And — of course — until you make use of my tanks. . . .”

After five minutes he had scarcely begun his discourse. It was that. Rienne saw him — in his room with its low ceiling, its dresser, table fetched from the kitchen, wooden chairs, all the fragments of an artisan’s home — pacing out with his soldier’s stiff walk, hour after hour, the line along which he would launch his tanks. During the past five days this line, pivoting on his poor room, had moved across an angle of as many degrees. . . . What had prompted Woert’s to let loose this flood of deliberation? Curiosity? Certainly not friendly curiosity. It was because he felt Woert’s malice that Rienne had tried to warn Ollivier, with his firmness and pig-headed innocence. Ollivier’s answering look of contempt made him smile in his sleeve.

Woert interrupted. The irony in his voice ran out to touch Rienne.

“What strategists all our colonels are now!” he smiled.

Chapter 33

EACH time Rienne visited Jean Mourey in his home, he felt the same acute pleasure that his friend lived in this and not in any other old house — very old, almost the oldest in

Seuilly. Certainly the most charming and friendly among the old houses. Ever since he was a boy Mourey had wanted just this house. Of the thirteenth century, it was small, and had grown shabby. Every part of it was shabby. The front door with the three semicircular steps and the carved jambs. The bricks, the cross-timbers. The roof half the height of the walls, and sharp, like narrowly-opened scissors. Modest as the house was, Mourey could not afford to live in all of it. The ground floor had been let to a midwife : then if she had to run out suddenly at night she would not be stumbling and creaking down the staircase. He kept for himself the upper floor and the attics.

In spite of its age, the house was certainly not senile. The wood was sound everywhere, the staircase stood with the assurance of steps in a lighthouse, the dry faded bricks formed a frame, a skeleton, of extreme toughness. It was like the better wines of Anjou and Touraine, delicate in colour, rather carelessly smooth, yet robust. It needed no condescension from the present, no piety, of the modern sort, towards relics : it lived in its own right. Unflustered, in its own sober and prudent strength. After all the labour, prayers, sufferings, pleasure, it had seen and accepted, it was still alert, still strongly and gaily accepting its present. All its presents, one after another as they came — generation after loyal generation. The newest sound — Mourey's three children running barefoot to save their shoes over the waxed floor — echoed in it no less firmly than the steps of the Huguenot vine-grower and his four grown-up sons when they were resisting expulsion : they were finally expelled dead on the 1st of June 1685. Among the marks the house kept in its memory, and ineffaceable at that level, was a mark of blood. After all, a very usual mark.

Here Mourey had been living — with the same sense of ease and fitness as if he were still living with his battalion — since he came back from the War. (Hard for him to remember that the War was now only a war.) The house gave him the same certainty of good faith, no less good for coming not from a few men of his age but from countless — he had tried to count them — age groups. As in the battalion, his responsibility was lightened by being shared with other Frenchmen. He had only to follow. What a relief to lay your hand on a stair-rail and be given with the smoothness of the old wood your orders for next day. For all the next days.

It was Mme Mourey who opened the door to Rienne. Still a young woman, usually silent, she greeted all her husband's friends from behind the same serious air of dignity. She dropped it only with Rienne, and let him see what she was — a young countrified woman, still in love with her husband. In love even with his shortcomings, his mind which was too preoccupied and his body too easily tired to give themselves up to her. She sat without talking, at the side of the table nearest the lamp, and mended. And mended. It was endless ; old clothes had to be made over for the younger children and new ones contrived, somehow — often out of her own — for the eldest. At this time in the evening all three were in the attic in bed, and she could work undisturbed. Now and then she lifted her head and, still not speaking, looked at Mourey with quiet bewilderment. She knew he trusted her and was fond of her : she knew, too, how little except kindness and trust he had to give. Taking his gift, she gave it the place of honour, like a mother pretending to be delighted with the poor little brooch her son has given her. Could he have afforded to spend more ? A true mother, she does not ask the question, even of herself. And perhaps she is really delighted.

As soon as Rienne came into the room he felt that something was wrong. Mourey was working as usual, the table covered with documents. But he was unhappy. Rienne had a dismayed moment when he feared there had been a quarrel : it might — he knew his friend — begin the ruin of this good marriage. In which all the devotion, the flowering of spirit and body, were on one side, and the dependence and withholding of self on the other. Nothing so audaciously balanced can afford shocks.

The glance Mme Mourey gave her husband as she went to her chair reassured him.

Without waiting for his friend to sit down, Mourey said, " They're going to pull down the house."

" What ? "

" I've told you," Mourey said. He spoke jerkily, with the senseless fury of a man too tired to bear kindness. " This house is to come down. My house. Someone, some damnable firm or other, is going to put an iron and concrete horror at this corner. It's not even needed. There's no need for any building of such a size. Not in Seully. In any case, the concrete is needed for other things. For the

war ! But what does that matter ? Not at all. The firm — I've been finding things out — belongs to a brother-in-law of the Minister, and both Georges Labenne and Monsieur de Thiviers are in it for thousands of shares. It's murder."

"I don't understand it," Rienne said.

He understood that Mourey was in the state of mind of a man whose friend has been killed idiotically. By an idiot of an officer sending him off to do some unnecessary and useless job. The order to demolish his house struck poor Mourey as insane ; he felt the despair of any man trapped by an insane force.

Mourey threw his arms up.

"The world had the luck to have this house built for it by men who knew how to build — they weren't thinking only of money. Money is putting up the iron and concrete, it will be fit for money to live in — that is, vulgar, senseless, modern, divided scientifically into cubes the same height and size, stairs not one deeper or shallower than the others, built quickly, not like a child coming after its full term. An abortion. Without a mind. Without a memory. They're going to destroy a house which is entirely memory — able to draw on five centuries of memories. Sunk that deep. You know, you can't put your hand on it anywhere without touching somewhere an immense column of time. There isn't a knot in the floor that doesn't include the past — every one of the pasts which have grown up in this house and people it. The house is a people itself. And they're destroying it. This whole people . . ." He looked at his wife — "You know, Michèle, why I like walking on our floors. I tell you, Bonamy, this house is alive. For an old house it's quite new, it would have lived easily another five hundred years. They'll have to murder it to get rid of it. Yes, yes, I know. I said that before. Michèle, poor girl, has been listening to me for hours. But I can't get used to the idea of all this — in a way it's Seuilly — it's almost France — being torn down, scattered. Forgotten. Lost."

"Why should it be forgotten ?" Rienne said. "You can add it to your book on Seuilly. . . . Your children won't forget it."

Mme Mourey gave him a look of affection. "It's what I was saying," she said in a low voice.

Mourey was silent ; his wife and his friend watched him helplessly, as little good to him as if he were dying. But —

not as if he were dying — none of their grief was for themselves. Mourey made an effort to smile. He was trying to think that at the end of a long life the house would come to flower in him in the first, the only moment of its perfection : it would even be better than the reality — as the memory of ecstasy is better than ecstasy. This is a lie, but if only out of politeness to our poor life, we should try to believe it.

"I'm an unbalanced fool," he said, looking at Rienne. "I have everything a man needs to be happy — and I make a fuss about a house."

"But what a house," Rienne murmured.

"Yes, yes. There isn't another like it. Not even in Seully. . . . If the Labennes have their way, in fifty years there won't be one like it in France. We shall have been brought up to date — that is, finished. . . . Nowadays we kill everything we touch."

Rienne let him talk. He knew that some of Mourey's bitterness would fly off in words : the rest would return and return, each time lighter. If he lived long enough, the cruel happiness he got out of his memory would equal exactly his grief now. He has a chance, Rienne thought : any civilian in this war has as good a chance as the next. He sat and listened, his body tilted stiffly forward. He listened with that part of his mind only open to this friend. Behind his quietness — patiently, with a lucid anxiety — he was studying the danger he felt threatening Émile. Spreading it out like a map, he examined the ground. From which side was the attack due to come ? From Émile himself ? He's too impatient and confident, Rienne thought ; he trusts his courage too far. . . . Well, what can I do ? Nothing. . . . During the last war he had learned that the limits within which you can interfere to save another man have been fixed narrowly, as narrowly as possible. War, if it teaches pity, teaches with the same stroke the indecency of indulging it.

He stood up, and invited Mourey to walk back with him. Michèle thanked him without speaking. She held out to him timidly a plate of cherries.

"Bonamy doesn't like black cherries," her husband said.

"I know. But we haven't anything else."

They walked as far as the Quai d'Angers in silence. A delicately clear night. The Loire, firm, supple, its banks sharply defined by sand, pretended to be idle. It was simply resting after a day spent drawing into itself all the light of a

wide valley filled and running over the brim with light.

"They can't spoil it," Mourey said. . . . Rienne thought : *La Loire est une reine et les rois l'ont aimée*, bringing it their gifts : Chambord, Blois, Chaumont, Amboise, and all the others.

At the end of the embankment they went into Marie's café. Marie greeted them without smiling and brought them their glasses of wine in a silence which she underlined by going back rapidly into the kitchen. There was one other customer ; he was a colleague of Mourey's. Jolivet, the mathematics master at the school, brought his glass to their table. It was more to the point that he brought his thin face, with the scar which was a completely different white from the white skin, and his sunken eyes, their dark surface lively with rising bubbles of light — his face a little too sensitive and intelligent. He was wearing a glove on his artificial hand. "It's providential," he said sometimes, "I always hated to write with chalk, because it came off on my fingers ; it comes off on the glove now."

Mourey asked him if he had seen the communiqué.

Jolivet's glove scribbled a sign of impatience. "Have I seen my foot ! I don't read them. I tell you, we're not fighting this war. That is, a few soldiers are fighting — they've been told off to, poor devils, for the look of it. They're having their legs pulled by the politicians. Pity the poor little corpses with one leg longer than the other ! My left arm, you know, is longer than my right, but I can still see and taste. . . . This is a good little wine. . . . I tell you, it won't last another month. Something will be arranged."

"With the Boches ?" Mourey said mildly.

"How you've changed," Jolivet smiled. "You used to be a pacifist !"

"I detest war. But — this is still, God knows for how long, a civilised country. Do you want to have to teach children Hitler's mathematics ?" Mourey paused. "When our armies were marching barefoot about Europe, at least they carried the Revolution in their packs."

Jolivet shrugged his shoulders. "Don't you think that the rest of Europe felt about Napoleon as we feel about Hitler ?"

"It's possible and means nothing."

"You won't provoke me by your hysteria," Jolivet said

calmly. "I know Hitler is a Boche. Who doesn't? All the same, he offered us friendship."

"With an innocent little invasion to follow," Mourey said.

"So what? We asked for it. Why? Tell me why. Why all this eyewash about the Poles? For years we had it driven into us that all those spectres wandering about Europe, the League — what a superb leg-pull! — the Negus, Austria, the Czechs, weren't worth a single dead Frenchman. They're not. I agree! You, d'you think it reasonable to try to kill off my two boys for a black savage, for a stump of a country, Austria, for Versailles bastards like Czechoslovakia? Why suddenly throw us into the fire for the Poles? Much good we've done them!" Jolivet's eyes sputtered with malice. "You know as well as I do that all the editors in Paris can be bought — and the same for the politicians — including our deputy. Good. If they've changed their tune and are only longing to kill Frenchmen now, someone else has paid them. Somebody has made it worth their while to annoy the merry Boche. Probably the English. Have I ever liked foreigners — English, Czechs, savages, Poles? Never. My instinct was sound — they've wangled us into another war. And if you think I don't know what war is . . . I've had my ration. I have my Croix de Guerre. Being a hero, let me tell you, is very unpleasant. Very tiring and dangerous. After 1918 I thought: You can go home; they've told your hand off to go and sit in some shell-hole or other; you mightn't come off so lightly next time. . . . I have my work, my flat, my books, my wife knows how to stuff and roast a duck, my father-in-law has a decent house at Olivet on the Loiret, the good Little Loire, and we can look forward to retiring to it — that's modest enough, isn't it? And now these gargoyles of Poles . . ."

He put his money on the table and stood up, grimacing. The heat, he said, made the scars in his side ache.

Mourey, very pale, called him back. He stammered with rage, as when he was talking about his house.

"Just a minute. We're not fighting for the Poles. It's because we can't let the Germans make a graveyard of Europe."

Jolivet had been calm. Now his bitterness kicked through that.

"You prove too much," he said. "We did that before; you see what's come of it. If Europe belonged to me I'd

give it to Hitler with pleasure. Who else wants it? Do we want it? I had a cousin in Budapest, our consul. I've seen photographs of their peasants gnawing refuse. You think Hitler can make worse of it? You're a fool, my dear Mourey. You've forgotten what a heap of dead Frenchmen looks like. All wars are glorious — and useless and murderous. This is like the others. I have one comfort — our noble Government has changed its mind once already about the value of a single Frenchman being equal to eighty million foreigners: it will do it again — and call the war off. Unfortunately, some have been promoted already to the rank of our glorious dead, my nephew is one of them — he was going to be a second Curie. How many foreigners and politicians equal one Curie? . . . There's only one Frenchman who equals the rest of Europe. Weygand. I don't trust anyone except our generals."

He glanced at Rienne: who said nothing. He had nothing to say to this civilian ex-soldier who was denying all he had given one of his hands, the right hand, for, and insisting that his house at Olivet more than equalled defeat. Equalled cowardice. Nothing — Rienne knew it better than either of the others — nothing is easier than to believe that war is murder. It is true in a way that only I know, he thought. I and other soldiers. The real knot — like the knots in Mourey's floor it included the whole of history — is harder. Has any man the right to refuse to kill an enemy who crosses the frontiers, very old and deeply sunk in the earth, of his country? True — some at least of the enemy are poor fellows who are obeying orders. If he wishes, a civilian can stop to argue whether freedom, when you must do murder for it, more than equals slavery. And about politicians and their guilt. None of it touches me — or, if it does, I shall keep my mouth shut. . . . Rienne looked with calm benevolence at the face, half respectful, half mocking, of the mathematics master, and did not speak. After a moment, Jolivet limped out.

"He's lost his senses," Mourey stammered.

"He'll find them before the Germans get here," Rienne said.

He had settled with himself to debit every outburst of this sort to the months of waiting. If you stretch a line too tightly along the frontiers for months, here or there it will give. What of it? There are not two sorts of Frenchmen, not two

courages of the French bone. Or, if there are, in war-time they exactly equal one another. Rienne's arithmetic was simple : it was perhaps not arithmetic at all, as a mathematician understands it. He counted Jolivet as a good Frenchman. He had seen many such soldiers, all grouzers and sceptics, and they were not the worst. They only need their orders.

He looked up. Marie had come back. She was standing beside them with her arms hanging, like a child, or like a woman who is used to letting things go — her husband, let's say, or her happiness. Her face had an evasive look ; she was showing only half her trouble.

" Can I have your advice ? " she asked Rienne timidly.

" Of course," Rienne said. He thought : Pierre is in trouble.

The young woman took out of her pocket a letter badly typed on cheap paper. Mourey recognised it at once as coming from that litter-machine, the political Left. With her respect for anything written, Marie wiped the table before dropping the letter in front of them. They both read it. It was addressed to M. Ernest Huet, Deputy. In turgid — that is, dishonest — sentences, it invited him to force the Government to make peace ; if he refused, the undersigned, wife of one of his electors, would know how to behave next time. And so on and so forth.

" Where did you get it ? " Mourey asked.

Marie looked at him with mistrust. " One of the customers — I know him — left it here. He says I must sign it and send it to our deputy. . . . I won't tell you his name. You won't ask me ? "

Rienne turned it over with a finger.

" I should destroy it."

The young woman's respect for him was so deep that she forced herself to tear the letter in pieces.

" But how I should like to hear of an armistice," she sighed.

" My poor child," Rienne said, " you're too fond of your husband to want him to turn into a coward."

" No, you're mistaken," Marie said quickly. " If Pierre was a coward and with me, I should be happy. I should be happier with him than with a dead hero."

" He will be a hero and alive," Rienne said. " He has every chance."

Marie shivered. It is unlucky to say these things — even under your breath. “But the news is bad.”

“The first news is always bad. We’re not Germans, we don’t nurse our wars beforehand. It’s nothing. We shall win.”

Marie called up a poor little smile — a smile of the least robust class, the one called up at the end of a war, to fill the gaps. Surprisingly, there is often a hero among these weakly boys. It was late : she bolted the door behind them. Mourey went off to the right, to his threatened house, and Rienne to the left.

He walked slowly. There was a largeness about these May nights. They included easily everything they had to : silence, the warmth of the day, the gentle Angevin valley, the Loire with the Loiret and all her other daughters. For fully a minute Rienne lost his perpetual hidden sense of impatience. During this minute he was able to think without impatience of his idleness — held here, with German tanks ploughing the Somme battlefield. Out of all the nights he had spent on the Somme during the last war he remembered one, one only : a night when he slept soundly and woke to a sunrise of such inhuman beauty that he felt certain of its place in his memory. And forgot it at once until this second, the last, of the minute it took him to turn his back on the Loire and turn towards the barracks.

Chapter 34

WHEN Lucien came into the library Catherine pretended to be very surprised.

“What ? You here again ? ”

The young hypocrite had been waiting for two hours to catch him — since she heard her mother telephoning to Bergeot at the Prefecture to send her the handbag she had forgotten. She knew Lucien would bring it. Bergeot would not send a clerk who might grumble at having the errand added to his day’s work.

“Why have you come ? ”

"I must go back at once," Lucien answered. "I came, you know, on my motor-cycle."

He was following her as he spoke through the french window on to the lawn.

"You can go round this way. Past the stables. . . . I didn't know you had one."

"*He* got it for me," Lucien said. "It's ridiculous" — he smiled sheepishly — "the fellow who showed me how to handle it said I have a mechanical touch. I've drafted a letter to Colonel Rienne about it. Will you look at it for me?"

Catherine read through the letter — nearly illegible, it had been crossed out and overwritten so often. She kept back a smile.

"Need you write as though you were paralysed?"

"It's not right?" Lucien asked. He was anxious.

"In one line you say he promised to get you into the tank corps, and in the next you tell him who you are. If he's forgotten you, he's forgotten his promise. And you write stiffly. Like a schoolmaster."

Lucien took the paper out of her hands and tore it up.

"Don't laugh at me," he said. "Help me."

Leaning against the wall of the house, he stared in front of him at the trees masking the river. In the west over Nantes the sky was an acid green; a few stars were dissolving in it so rapidly they were nearly invisible. There were bats. Catherine got ready to duck if one of them came near her, and from the corner of her eye watched Lucien glare at the sunset. She had questioned Bergeot and learned enough about him to pretend she knew everything. That it was from his mother he had his strong peasant bones and big frame, and it was his mother had made him ambitious. She had no need to see his mother to know exactly how she would hold a child between her strong hands. From his father he had his obstinacy, his blond skin and blue eyes, and his reserve with women. Once a day he had eaten soup — from Sophie, who came from the same commune as the Sugnys and the next village, she knew what went into it, and that he ate from a glazed yellow bowl. He slept, when he was little, next the wall in the bed he shared with an elder brother; afterwards he had the outside, and a younger child learned to keep his knees within a third of the bed.

It was satisfactory to know so much. Above all things in life, Catherine craved certainty. She wanted no com-

plexity, no mysteries. The less Lucien had had in his life — few young men so intelligent could have had less — the better pleased she was. A surprise which would delight Bella or Valérie — to learn that he was really the son of : Duc de Scully, and the Sugnys only foster-parents — would have sent her flying from him. Above all, there must be no lies in his past.

"You could say — Colonel Rienne. Sir. I am Lucier Sugny, private secretary to the Prefect. You were kind enough to promise to get me into the army if things became serious. In my opinion they are serious. I beg you to do me this great kindness. I have the honour to be, Sir, Your obedient servant, L. Sugny." She looked at him openly. "Must you go?"

"Obedient servant?" Lucien repeated. "Is that really the right ending? It sounds a little — official."

"So — when you are writing a formal letter for the Prefect — you sign it Yours ever?"

"No. Of course not."

"Then——"

"Oh, well," Lucien said hurriedly, "the fact is, it sounds servile. I have a right to be in the army!"

"You have the right!" Catherine mocked. "Very well, if you have so much right, why aren't you commanding a battalion? The war isn't going so brilliantly. We can't afford to neglect a military genius."

Lucien turned on her. "You have an abominable tongue."

She was delighted by her success — and his words hurt her.

"I was trying to help you; you asked me," she said, with false meekness.

"I was a fool!"

She pricked him again. "But you needn't be, you're quite intelligent."

Lucien's expression changed. This time she had gone too far, he saw what she was up to. In the same moment — he was not vain — he knew that she liked him, she was better than interested in him. An extraordinary sense of danger and exultance seized him. He blinked, and looked directly at her.

"Your letter is the right one," he said calmly. "I shall write it — this evening as soon as I get back."

"And do you think he'll help you?" she asked timidly.

In an instant she had lost all her self-confidence. She was confused, and tried not to seem it. A bat could flutter into her hair at this moment and she would not even shudder.

"I don't know. If not, I shall have to speak to *him* again."

He meant the Prefect. After a silence, Catherine said,

"I wanted to nurse. When I ask her, my mother won't even listen."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

This was a lie. In her first week at home she had guessed what it was her mother hoped. That she would make a good marriage and bring into the family a son-in-law of whom Mme de Freppel could be proud, and who would flatter her and give her social security. Under her mother's careless talk and seeming indifference, Catherine had divined a snob. What she had not guessed, and never would, was the excuse of this poor snob. She knew nothing about her mother's fearful struggle out of the mud; she did not know that Mme de Freppel had had to cure herself of habits learned when she was a hungry child and practised in sordid rooms which had become in her memory one room; that she had taught her voice the assurance, if necessary the insolence, of those who expect to be obeyed. That for an hour before she walked into Mme Huet's drawing-room she went through an agony of nervousness. That she longed, and was afraid, to be invited by the Duchesse de Seuilly and other ladies of the provincial families who, so far, had ignored her existence. If she could enter their world by way of her daughter's marriage, what a relief! . . . Of this Catherine understood nothing. Her mother's snobbery amused her. She did not even take it seriously. And she had not the least intention of letting it dictate her marriage or way of life.

She looked at Lucien, who was looking at her. Both turned away at once, losing courage. They walked quickly, oppressed by a feeling of guilt and failure, past the commons to the other side of the house. Lucien set off on his motor-cycle, weaving from side to side of the drive. Catherine hollowed her hands to shout, "Take care." He caught her voice without the words, and turned his head. The machine lurched madly.

"Go away," she yelled, waving him on. He accelerated and was out of sight. The noises of his engine became less

erratic as they came from farther and farther off, until she could hear nothing but a firm, scarcely noticeable vibration. A jay screaming over her head drowned it. Afterwards she listened in vain. Her ear had lost the pitch.

She went in. Mme de Freppel was in the library, and Catherine saw at once that she had seen her talking to Lucien. Smiling amiably, she picked up her book. Perhaps if I keep quiet . . . But her mother was not willing to let it pass.

"Were you," she asked, "talking to Émile's secretary?"

"Yes," Catherine said. She did not look up.

She knew her mother was afraid of her. Afraid of vexing or boring her. She had no idea why. She could not guess that her mother felt guilty. Because she had wanted to be rid of her when she was a child. And now, because this guilt was setting its teeth in her, a little deeper each day, her courage to give orders had gone. All the girl knew was that somehow she was in a strong position. With the irresponsibility of the young who have been sheltered she made good use of it. But her mother did not try to use her authority. It was too late. She was too drily aware of the desert between her and this friendly uninterested daughter. She thought: I have lost her. She recalled, with anguish, the day when Catherine was a little girl and wept because she was going away. Her anguish became a torment. How could I, she thought, have been so cruel, so selfish, so blind? There was nothing to be done. For a mother to know her child she has to pay in advance with full devotion, full interest, a full honesty. And be prepared to be cheated. Animal love on the one side and on the other a friendly indifference do not bridge the abyss between the generations. Mme de Freppel's only hope now was that Catherine would want the same things her mother wanted for her. Worldly brilliance, and marriage into a good family. Then she could use all her wits to help her. They would be allies. . . . How I shall like to say casually to Andrée Huet, "My daughter the Comtesse de Saint-Jouin", or "de Nivernois". . . . Was it for Catherine she wanted safety? Or for herself? Why not for both? Her vanity, if Catherine made a bad marriage, would be mortally hurt. Her poor vanity. There you have her. Yes, yes, but the mothers who hope a virtuous rather than a brilliant marriage for their child are shockingly rare.

"He's a nice boy but terribly clumsy," she said.

"I hadn't noticed it," Catherine said briefly.

"I believe his father is a sort of farmer. That would account for it."

Catherine looked up from her book with a vague bright smile. It said plainly: I'm attending to you out of politeness, but I want to read. Mme de Freppel hesitated. The telephone in the next room rang, and she went to it. Catherine stretched herself in her chair. Keeping her book open, she let herself slide into a dream. . . . Lucien was in uniform, a private soldier. His uniform of course did not fit him. It touched him at points, and wherever it touched she laid her hand lightly. What incredible happiness! But he had tears in his eyes. It was the last time, the last of all last times. With an unmoved face she heard that he had been killed. . . . As soon as her mother came back she got up and went out of the room. A young widow ought to be left to her grief.

Chapter 35

BERGEOT's secretary had just told him that two people were waiting to see him — Colonel Rienne and M. Mathieu. "Ask them to excuse me for two minutes," he said. "I'll ring."

He felt bored and at the end of his strength. At this moment he would rather have seen two enemies than two of his friends; you know where you have an enemy. He had always known. Since his first year at the Law School. Since earlier, since his first year at school in Seully. Since his first day there — the morning he walked into the playground and glanced from the corner of his eyes at the group of boys chattering under the big elm. Since that instant he had known how to handle an enemy. He knew what to say to induce a given emotion. He knew to a smile how much to pretend to give away as he talked, when to show himself experienced and agile, when to be the crude provincial. By a sort of second hearing, he reconnoitred the country behind his opponent's mind and blunted the attack. He knew by

feel what sort of flattery to apply. He must have been born with his skill in the art of arriving by a confident use of people. . . . He had two grave weaknesses — also no doubt born with him.

He never gave a promise without trying, even at loss to himself, to keep it — a moral weakness which would make a career as a Minister very difficult. And, with a pen in his hand, he could not resist telling the truth. This calvinism, this honesty, went hand in hand with a tortuous dishonesty. He would flatter a friend without conscience, flatter and if possible injure a rival ; but he had a loyalty to ideas which was almost beyond his control, almost involuntary. Because of it, he did not draw all the benefits due to him for his manœuvring of persons. He had no idea himself that his two monographs, both on obscure points of legal practice, and his few articles in legal and political quarterlies, gave him away in every line.

He had a feeling of guilt towards his friends. They gave him, he thought, credit for an honesty he did not possess. They knew what his beliefs were ; they heard him, when he had written his speech beforehand, speak boldly ; they did not imagine the personal perjuries and flinchings of his life. They did not imagine how often he held his tongue, how often he trembled in his provincial skin in the fear of being laughed at by a powerful journalist or an experienced politician. His friends, he thought, must be fools not to see it. He felt a contempt for them. Sometimes even for Rienne.

And with all this — he was vain. He kept at the back of his mind a generous, stubborn, recklessly honest Émile Bergeot, not valued at his worth by a vulgar world. . . . Admirable image. Brave solitary little figure. All good things come, they say, in small packets. One day, the rest of the world will recognise you. . . . When he was beginning to dislike himself, when he felt humiliated, this good little image protected him. It was as far as he ever reached in knowing himself. He took care never to go beyond it.

His best moments were the first stages of a fight. The first brush with the enemy called out all his guile, courage, lucidity. His mind blazed with energy. But there were days when to have to see his friends and supporters filled him with bored anxiety — he had to bore himself to be what they thought he was. Merely to think of seeing Rienne and Mathieu made him feel tired.

The second door of his room opened. It was Marguerite who came in, with her half-defiant, half-coaxing air. Why had he never noticed before that she had a touch of his malady, the same, the very same? He saw it, and forgot it at once.

"Forgive me a few minutes," he said, "I have people waiting to see me."

"Who?"

"Bonamy. Louis Mathieu."

"I'll stay and see them."

"I'd rather you didn't," he said, smiling at her.

She hesitated. He saw that she was vexed and a little mortified. It was too much trouble to cajole her.

"Why have they come?" she asked.

"I don't know until I see them."

"Don't let them talk you into something rash," she said, frowning.

She went back into the room she used as her own when she came to see him. It was separated from his by a space crammed with old files, and had its own door on the staircase.

He rang the bell. When the two men came in, he was all smiles and eager warmth. He saw at a glance that Bonamy had come to encourage him and Mathieu to criticise.

"The two people I most needed to see. Did you come together? Is it a plot?" The prospect of having to outwit Mathieu sent his spirits leaping up.

"In fact, no," Mathieu said. "But I'm not sorry to let Rienne hear what I have to say. I shan't keep you five minutes."

Bergeot turned to him an air of eager interest. You've come, he thought, to denounce a traitor of some sort; nothing gives you so much pleasure as to be justly ruthless — you minor prophet, you.

Mathieu had a trick of lifting his hand, palm turned down, rigid, as though both edges were sharp enough to cut. The edge rose or fell as he denounced or was, moderately, content. Just now he held it level with his throat.

"Do you know — obviously you don't — that Labenne was closely involved with Edgar Vayrac, not only politically but in other ways? I can rely on my information. It comes from the police. I'm not able to give you any names."

Bergeot did not answer. He was impatient and un-

interested. Of course Labenne had a dubious side to his character. It was no shock to find him associating with a man in gaol, known to have owned brothels, and probably an agent in Italian — which was bad enough — or — less excusable — German pay. But he felt no eagerness to expose Labenne, at any time ; especially now. 'What a bore a Saverola is, he thought.

"You don't surprise me," he said at last.

"I didn't expect to," Mathieu said coldly. "What I want is to put you on your guard. Do you feel comfortable about discussing your civil defence plans with a Mayor who may discuss them with a pro-German ? In the end he'll do you down. You personally."

"That doesn't alarm me."

"Only," Mathieu said, "because you don't believe it. As you like. But the man is a traitor."

Bergeot raised his eyebrows.

"I'm not given to exaggeration," Mathieu retorted.

"No," Bergeot said. He pretended not to have any suspicion that he was on trial. "I know you too well. But what's your advice ? Do you advise me to begin now on the appalling job of investigating Labenne ? With all that will mean — you know what it will mean — in intrigue and counter-intrigue, between the police and the Police ? It's too much. And surely it's a stroke of luck that Vayrac is locked up ? Labenne isn't likely to run himself into trouble for a crook who has been blown on. He's reasonable, after all !"

He had only convinced Mathieu that he was shirking an unpleasant task. He saw that. Such singleness of mind exasperated him madly. If a guillotine thinks, it must think exactly like Louis, he groaned. And if you begin guillotining traitors, you're forced to go on, to guillotine half-traitors, quarter-traitors ; you've begun a purge. Bergeot's heart — or was it only his will ? — shrank from the effort. He seized the excuse pushed forward by his assiduous mind.

"My dear Louis, I know that so far as frivolity and corruption are concerned, there's no difference between our little politics here and the ball game between Ministers, bankers, generals. They're both politics. But I'm an over-worked Prefect, not a Minister. I can't both run a purge and cope with the war as it affects Seuilly. Two wars. It's madness."

"You think so?" Mathieu said.

"I'm sure!"

Mathieu lowered his hand and his eyelids at the same moment, and became unreadable. He must have given up hope of assassinating anyone. He said politely,

"I was sure you would say so. My conscience — you can count on it — made me warn you."

"Your conscience would be the death of me," Bergeot smiled.

"Probably," Mathieu agreed. "If Labenne kills you — I mean politically, of course — you won't die of an enlarged conscience. Just the same, you'll die."

"You exaggerate his importance," Bergeot said with energy. "Leave him to me, I'll answer for him being harmless. Besides, he's too busy making himself rich."

"Are you quite sure," Mathieu said, "that you know where all his money comes from? And where he keeps it?"

He turned his head brusquely. Mme de Freppel came into the room through a door immediately behind him; he was furious that he had not noticed this door. Her fixed candid smile made him certain she had been listening: unless the door had been ajar, she would not have played so clumsily with the handle.

"Monsieur Mathieu," she said charmingly, "I wanted to tell you how good your articles have been lately."

Mathieu thanked her drily.

"If every editor of a newspaper were as uncompromising——"

He interrupted her with an insulting anger. "You would feel less comfortable. As it is, you can be polite to me. I'm harmless."

She let him see that she felt his rudeness. Mathieu left. No surgeon completing an operation of which the patient will die could feel a more metaphysical delight in doing his duty. The Prefect had watched him with irony.

"There goes an honest man," he said. "The rest of us not only have to put up with his honesty, but pay for it. Why does he think that being outrageously honest gives him the right to be insolent?"

"You can rely on him to support you," Rienne said; "you can't be as sure of all your allies."

Without reflecting, Bergeot retorted furiously, "If the

day comes when I have nothing left to rely on but Mathieu's honesty, I'm lost." He turned to Mme de Freppel. "And now, my child, since you've shocked my editor — he'll think you live here——"

"Are you all mad?" Mme de Freppel cried. She was humiliated by her failure with Mathieu; it had released all her fears, threatening her with a failure she would not be able to control. "We may even be losing this war, and you two go on nodding portentously like mandarins. Bonamy plays at defending Seuilly with his tin soldiers, you play at being Prefect. It's ridiculous. It's like men. I know. There are rules for every situation, even for losing a war. You are good little officials. You obey the rules. You shut your eyes to what is going on — until it has happened. Until you're being killed, ruined. And until I am."

She had startled Rienne into listening to her with the same detached notice he took of a dispute between Ligny and Woerth. He noticed that she was even more alarmed than she said; she was in a mood of panic. He saw, too, that she had no scruples about making a scene in the Prefect's room: the clerks could hear her in the room across the corridor. She must be in the habit of making scenes here. He felt profoundly shocked.

"What are you talking about?" Bergeot said. "You could save all this for the evening, my poor child."

He glanced at Rienne. His glance said: You see what I have to put up with, but what can you do with a woman in a rage? Rienne met his glance coolly, careful not to give notice of his distaste.

Mme de Freppel was beyond herself; she ran towards Bergeot, lifting her clenched hands in a superb gesture. "I'm saying that we shall lose everything. We shall be poor. I shall be poor. You think I don't know what poverty is? And cruelty? I know better than either of you. My bones know it. And I know you're not the sort of man who can carry off a failure. Or be faithful to me when I'm hideous because I'm poor. I couldn't face it again, I'm too old. I shan't forgive you, I shall remind you of it when I'm dying, when a bomb kills me — if you won't even try to save us. . . ."

Rienne detested scenes. He could not stand this one any longer; and he wanted to reflect on his discovery that she harassed Émile in this shameless way.

"Forgive me, I must go now," he said in a calm voice.

Mme de Freppel looked at him with nervous dislike. "You disapprove of me. You can! I disapprove of your influence over Émile, and your revolting insensibility. I detest anyone who likes war. I can see a use for concentration camps. To shut up warmongers! You — I——"

"Don't go," Bergeot said to him.

Smiling a little, he took Marguerite in his arms and talked to her as though she were a sullen child. Yes, the news was bad; yes, they were probably both ruined. And Bonamy — Bonamy was nothing but a soldier, a professional murderer. It was all true and all unimportant. Important things couldn't be talked over now. . . .

She freed herself. "When?"

"This evening."

"You'll come home early?"

"Yes, I promise," Bergeot cried.

"To dinner."

"No. After dinner. About nine."

Her face changed, to a tigerish gaiety. Licking her finger, she rubbed it on her sleeve and drew it quickly across her throat. "See this finger wet, see it dry; cut your throat if you're telling a lie?"

"Yes, yes," Bergeot laughed.

He shut the door on her and turned round with a face emptied of gaiety, an anxious husband's poor baffled face. Coming back to his desk, he sat down, deflated.

"My God, I'm tired."

"Is it necessary for Marguerite to come in when you're working?" Rienne said gently.

Bergeot made excuses for her: she was nervous; her position was abominably difficult. If only Freppel would divorce her . . .

Rienne did not speak: he was appalled by his glimpse into the disorder of his friend's life, and Marguerite's indecent interference. It was obviously a usual happening. I've been blind not to see it, he thought. He blamed his blindness; he was not conceited enough to think she would take trouble to mislead him.

"I never thought it wise to let her spend so much time in the Prefecture," he said. "She ought not to have a room here."

Bergeot shrugged his shoulders. "If she were legally my wife she would insist less on her privileges," he said

frankly. "I have to make allowances for that." He looked at Rienne. "You think I'm being cynical? Far from it, I assure you. But you're not married and you don't know anything about women."

Rienne felt a little ashamed of the simplicity of his life. He had never, except for brief episodes when he was a young man, been in love. The war first; and after the war, service abroad, had taken all his energy and will. Almost without noticing it, he had withdrawn as finely from the world as a monk. Soldiering, in all its shapes, with all its ugly necessities — over which, as over its moments of ecstasy and contentment, his mind closed sharply — had absorbed him more and more, taking away his life and giving him — what? A sort of peace. A strength without desires. As if it had taken the place of his young belief in God. The face war had shown him was neither wholly cruel nor wholly fascinating, but the fascination, like the cruelty, was real. And absorbing. And jealous. With such a jealousy that never perhaps, after his twenty-fifth year, had he been tempted, seriously tempted, to place a woman's face next it.

Bergeot had revived — with that lucky resilience which surprised and charmed his friends.

"Mathieu is not the only stubborn man in Seuilly. He thinks so. Being a Jew, he's a religious fanatic." His eyes sparkled with malice.

"You're unjust to him," Rienne said, smiling.

"Very well, I'm unjust. Who cares? Did he tell you — I've written an article for him? You'll see it on the front page of tomorrow's *Journal*. It's masterly." He laughed at his boast, but his friend saw that he was delighted with himself, and blown out by the excitement which followed his moods of discouragement. "It's a message. An order of the day for us civilians. Forward the fallen arches, the varicosed legs! No one can avoid this war. Civilians are involved as hopelessly as soldiers and they must have the fantasies of war. And the fanaticism. They'll need it."

"You can't fight on excitement," Rienne said. "You've become a proper civilian. . . . I must go."

Bergeot walked with him to the door, opened it, and looked along the corridor. He said quietly,

"Don't think I don't know what a mess we're in. Amiens, Arras, Abbeville, Laon — all the names of the last war coming back, and in one day. It's frightful. I sleep badly."

I dream about the war. . . . The brutes must be nearing the Chemin des Dames. We had a boy killed that evening, I only remember him because we'd tried to look after him, he was very willing, docile, if you like — but he was puzzled from the first day to the last, his last, and made mistakes. He was so light the men thought they were burying a child. . . .”

“There were others like him.”

“You . . . soldier,” Bergeot said, smiling. He turned back.

“I forgot something I had to say to you,” Rienne said quickly. “That Prussian fellow at Geulin. Captain von Uhland. Did you have him vetted?”

Bergeot let his weariness flow over his body; his shoulders drooped. He smiled feebly, exhausted. His friend was remorseful, even though he recognised a trick.

“I did. He's all right. As soon as I can find a minute I'll push him through. The difficulty is to find the minute.” His voice changed, and became spiteful. “I suppose Louis put you up to remind me.”

Chapter 36

BERGEOT reached the Manor House late — near midnight. He got out and listened to the sound of the car being driven through the arch into the courtyard; it stopped noisily, the door shut, a house door opened and a woman's voice grumbled into the darkness. The silence stretched itself suddenly to fill the whole dark hemisphere. He was tempted to go round to the other side of the house, to see whether the Loire, sunk in its summer bed, had kept for the last some flicker of light it was giving off now: the line of sand drawn under each bank would be the colour of ivory in the starlight. He was too tired. He rested his hands and forehead on the stone of the doorway, feeling its centuries of life beating steadily at the surface of the stone in his finger-tips. But it is my own life, he thought; my poor short life. A rage he knew well filled him, and despair, because of the shortness of

his tie in front of a glass. How old I look, he thought, grimacing. He tilted his face to the light to see its lines ; his hair, thick and wiry, had begun to go back at the twin peaks of his forehead. The thought of growing old disgusted him. So actively that the spurt of rage revived him. . . . I have years of a long life in front of me ; all we Bergeots are hard to kill off. . . . Turning round, he saw that Marguerite was sunk in her thoughts. She had stretched out a bare leg, the fineness of the ankle denied by the knot of muscles higher up ; she was straightening and bending back the toes with the easy menace of a cat stretching and hiding its claws. She was absorbed and impatient. He saw that she was waiting for him to speak.

"What's the matter, my child ?"

She looked at him, with sudden gravity and candour, from a dull blackness where his own glance would not know whether it was lost or close to a wall.

"You'll be making a mistake if you release Mathieu's German friend. Now, at least. Perhaps later you could do it. But at this time — when you need all the support you can get. Bonamy is inexperienced — a soldier, not a government official. Think of the scandal your enemies will make of it — the Prefecture is under Jewish influence — Monsieur Bergeot has too many German friends ! You know just how you will be abused——"

"Oh, abuse !" Bergeot said.

Marguerite lifted her hands in a gesture of indifference and mockery. "Pr-r-r . . . have it your own way," she said, smiling. "You don't mind abuse. I know. You're strong, immovable. And your precious schemes — which I don't like at all — are immovable, too, eh ? How do you know Mathieu is not doing this deliberately to ruin you ? You don't know. You want" — afraid to make a mistake, she felt for a thrust that would convince him without rousing his vanity and self-will — "you want to show him and Bonamy that you're generous. You're a child. An idiot. Like all heroes when they're not fighting. And Bonamy is too innocent, he doesn't know what he's dipped his hand in." Her voice had become gentle. She brushed his cheek with her fingers. "My darling Emile, be just a little sensible. Your German can surely wait until you could let him out without ruining your plans ?"

He was struck by her acuteness. So often he felt that

he was clumsier than she in reading motives. . . . He had forgotten that Mathieu had snubbed her this afternoon.

"You may be right," he murmured.

She said nothing, not wanting to risk more pressure on his vanity.

"Yes. I'm almost sure you're right. I can let it ride a few weeks. Why not? I have all the time in the world," he said joyously.

He took hold of her hands and pulled her up to lie like a finger of sun along his body. His lassitude had gone, and he carried her across the room. She lay watching him, lying with arms doubled back, palms upward, against her shoulders. She closed her hands over the edge of his shoulders. They were at first the coolest, then the moist and burning points of his body. Now he could let himself laugh quietly, getting rid of some of the pain of his inner laughter. It was, after all, an act of good-humour, even a joke, a leg-pull. He took possession of himself, easing his angry nerves, drawing on an energy in her as much as in himself. Without effort. In the end there is so narrow a difference between weariness and well-being, between thinking and sleeping. . . .

Chapter 37

MATHIEU was not at the second meeting of the Committee of Civil Defence next morning. Bergeot felt relieved of a light burden on his conscience. And vexed, when Labenne, carrying in his buttonhole a yellow rose the size of his fist, came in to say that, alas, he was very busy and could not find time to attend. Bergeot smiled in his face, to show his indifference to the insult.

"We know you have other interests besides the safety of the town," he said.

The Mayor took this jibe with a placid face, without a movement of his lips below the fringe of coarse black hair which accented them. Still looking in his face, Bergeot was not quick enough to catch the slight narrowing of his pupils.

Labenne's face was so ostentatiously a peasant mask of covetousness, double-dealing, brutality, that when people looked at him they corrected it instinctively to read prudence, competence, power. Bergeot could not help admiring him for his energy. He was drawn to him by the vigorous warmth Labenne gave off, as though he carried about with him the slopes planted with joyous vineyards, the southern fruits, all the odours and ardent heat of summer in Anjou. It was difficult not to feel friendly towards Labenne when he smiled with that charm and rich gaiety which must, surely, come from the heart.

He had reached the door before he turned round and looked at Bergeot with one of these smiles.

"I've just read your article in the *Journal*," he said. "Magnificent. Congratulations."

"Thanks," Bergeot said.

He felt flattered in spite of himself by this praise, so spontaneous that it must be genuine. Scoundrel Georges Labenne may be, he thought confusedly, but he's a pleasant fellow, with a fund of decency. He relaxed as though he were stretching himself in a field at Thouédun, in the warmth and manifold life of that deep valley, the ground under him bursting with its own richness like a vast gourd; he felt kindly towards even gross human beings, and the smile he gave Labenne had in it a point, a very obvious point, of condescension.

"Good of you to run in," he said indifferently.

As the door closed on Labenne he turned on the three remaining members of the Committee — Piriac, Woerth, M. de Thiviers — a face full of respect. He had taught himself young the habit of being simple and respectful with great men. He rarely broke the habit. Held by it, and half out of pity, he would listen to some long-winded old Senator with a lively air of interest. It was not real pity. He had less of it than any of the people he listened to, charmed by his interest in them, would have believed.

With a smile, he invited the commander-in-chief to speak. General Piriac was sitting in his usual attitude in public, arms and doubled fists resting, to buttress his heavy body, on the table. At this moment his thoughts had gone so far from him that looking into his blue eyes you would only have seen a single object, like one of the figures a child cuts out and pastes on a blank page, a horse he had ridden when

he was a subaltern, a tunic belonging to his father. When the Prefect spoke he looked slowly at his chief of staff, turning his head without moving any part of his body. Woerth spoke at once.

"I disapprove of your article in the *Journal*," he said. "You are ignorant of the situation. There is no hope now of a stand on the Somme. Or on the Seine."

Bergeot felt the shock, in the centre of his body, of being reproved. It was so severe, so humiliating, that the significance of what Woerth was saying missed him completely. His feeling of disgrace hid the quarter of France already lost and the quarter that was being abandoned. He forced himself to say deliberately,

"Then it will be the Loire."

"Possibly," Woerth said drily.

The Prefect assumed at once that Woerth was treating him as an ignorant civilian, perhaps even believed that he was ignorant. His proper pride—he had not become Prefect of Seuilly by a lucky accident—as well as his vanity, were roused. The part of him he repressed, the instincts which would have made him a mocker of authority and respectability, sprang out.

He looked at Woerth, a glance full of shrewd impudent amusement, quite detestable.

"You don't seem very sure. Fortunately for us, you're not in Weygand's shoes. They won't ask you to decide which of our rivers is to be handed to the Boches."

This insult—so dangerous—restored his self-respect. He felt confident and excited. Blinded by it, he missed entirely the flicker of rage in Woerth's eyes. Woerth prudently lowered his eyelids. A soldier of the time when wars had rules, which were kept, he knew when not to strike. Besides, Piriac had moved. His hands, still doubled, drew back a bare inch, with the result that he was even more rigid, more nearly his own monument. He disliked being forced to lean forward, it gave him a feeling of giddiness, as though his seventy years had slipped behind and were pushing him. To have moved his hands at all was a sign of extreme agitation.

"Monsieur Bergeot, you are not a soldier," he said severely. "I have to remind myself that you are a Prefect. When I was shown your—what was it you called it?—your message this morning, in the *Journal*, I had to remind

myself. Otherwise I should have said, This irresponsible fellow — this journalist——”

The Prefect felt his humiliation rise to his throat where it could strangle him. He kept a stolid look on his face.

“General Piriac——” he began.

“Don’t interrupt,” Piriac said. “You interrupt too often. It’s a fault. I must remind myself that you are a civilian. What right have you to print inflammatory messages? If there is fighting near Seuilly, the only duty of civilians will be that of obeying my orders. The town will be evacuated——” He paused — certain that Bergeot would realise that a commander-in-chief’s shortness of breath is as sacred as his words.

“Is it proposed to evacuate Paris, in order to defend it?” Bergeot said vivaciously.

“What?” The only thing Piriac took in was that once more he had been interrupted. He looked at Bergeot with cold fury. “Your conduct is doubly dangerous and indecent. As a civilian, you ought in a crisis of this sort to hold your tongue. As an official . . . you don’t even understand the nature of the crisis. We ought not to have begun this war now, we were not armed for it and it is too late to think of arming. . . .”

His voice disappeared on his last words as suddenly as if a flag had been pulled down. He may have wondered why he was explaining anything to a civilian. . . . In fact, Bergeot was still stupefied by his sense of disgrace and failure. He looked at Thiviers, hoping to surprise from him a grain of help. Thiviers had said nothing: gazing at the table with an air at once vague and benevolent, as though meditating some charity for the use of the great-great-grandchildren of the citizens of Seuilly, he had drawn round him the veil of his private Sabbath. Bergeot was stretching out a profane hand to tap him on the arm and demand an opinion when Woerth began talking again.

He listened to Woerth with growing bitterness. The chief of staff had become almost suave. In a precise voice — he might have been addressing a meeting of senior officers — he laid it down that the overriding need was order, to keep order in Seuilly. Whether it were defended or not. And if it were not defended, the need, perhaps, would be even greater. Without using a harsh or insulting word he

managed to make Bergeot see that he was teaching him his job as Prefect.

Bergeot was as much mystified as enraged. He felt sharply that something — what? — had happened which made Woerth judge it wise to snub him. There is something more in this than high-minded military nonsense, he thought. He listened with painful intentness, trying to guess whether Woerth's politeness, more insulting every moment, were personal or official. Meant for Émile Bergeot or the Prefect? Have I, he wondered bitterly, an enemy in the Cabinet? A thought brushed his mind: the soldiers might be concealing from him an order that Seully was to be evacuated in certain circumstances. He dismissed it. Even Woerth would not treat the civilian chief of the Department with so much mistrust.

Woerth had just used the word order for the tenth time. Clearly, it was the equivalent in his mind of at least nine other words, such as freedom, hope, courage.

The door opened, and Mme de Freppel came in. As if she were in her drawing-room, she walked radiantly, smiling, towards General Woerth.

"I do so agree with you," she said. "You're absolutely right. I've warned the Prefect time and again."

Bergeot looked at her: he was dumbfounded. It was the first time she had interrupted a conference. Persons closeted with the Prefect had had to submit to the irruption of an angry or coaxing "Madame Prefect"; and they suspected of course that she had been waiting at the other side of the door to run in and prevent an infatuated Prefect from doing something she disliked, or take a hand in some business she chose to like. Until this morning, she had avoided a public outrage. And she must choose a meeting at which the commander-in-chief and his chief of staff were present. . . . Bergeot could not help admiring the boldness with which she broke every rule. Indiscretion at such a heat was almost courage. She may have ruined me, he thought proudly. . . . He could afford an insane moment of vanity, the vanity of a lover, because deep in himself he believed that nothing could ruin him.

"Please wait in the next room," he said to her, with a pretence of annoyance.

General Piriac had dragged himself painfully, without meaning to, from his chair. Forgetting where he was, he

realised only that a woman had come into the room. After a moment he became still more rigid, with annoyance. Thiviers had risen and was watching with an air of grave tact. It underlined the fact that Marguerite had behaved with the worst taste.

She took no notice of Bergeot. Quivering slightly with excitement, her body made an easy gesture — Mme Vayrac would have recognised it at once. She repeated, looking at Woerth,

“ You are perfectly right.”

Woerth glanced at her with distaste.

“ I am glad to have your approval.” He turned to Bergeot. “ This meeting need not go on.”

Piriac caught an inflection of the voice his chief of staff used to rouse him from the half-sleep he fell into sometimes, during a conference. Woerth, he saw, was waiting to follow him out of the room. Obediently, saluting Bergeot like an automaton, he moved to the door. It closed behind the two generals.

The Prefect turned to Mme de Freppel and smiled at her with a trace of excitement.

“ You’ve horrified my generals.”

“ Heavens, what a couple of sticks,” she said airily. She sat down, passing her hand through her hair so that it stood out like a mane cut in ebony. She looked at Thiviers. “ Do sit down, my dear Robert. What a face ! You can let yourself look human, this isn’t a memorial service.”

“ It was, before you came in, a conference,” Thiviers said gravely.

“ Idiot ! Do you expect me to sit about doing nothing while Émile ruins us both, with his absurd messages and calls to arms ? ”

“ Émile may — I say may — have done himself as much harm by his indiscretion as yours will do him. I doubt it.” Thiviers made an embarrassed gesture. “ Your ill-judged article in the *Journal*——” he said to Bergeot.

“ So you think that, too ! ” Bergeot said.

He felt suddenly tired, heavy. Abused from all sides, his dear article did at this moment seem only a ridiculous blunder. All his confidence, that it would impress people, do him credit, had been rudely pricked. Too rudely. He felt panic growing in him. So other people looked on him only as a fool, a crude uncouth upstart ? He would have

given a year of his life to forget the article. Part of his mind warned him that this was the precise moment to attack and convince Thiviers. And if Thiviers would not be convinced, then trounce him. But his energy played him false. Or his vanity.

Instead he began to justify himself. It was painful to watch him — if either of his listeners had realised what was going on. He explained his article until he had drained off its energy, leaving it a rag, like any poor rag hanging, bleached of human nature, on the barbed wire. M. de Thiviers listened stiffly. At last, in a calm voice, marking his phrases by dividing them in half, he said,

“And why in the *Journal* — of all papers? That gutter rag. Why encourage it? Do you imagine Mathieu would hesitate to misrepresent you? If he could. If he were told. If he knew about your prudence in placing a little money abroad.”

He looked at Bergeot with a friendly smile.

Chapter 38

“AND what, Monsieur de Thiviers, can I do for you?”

Labenne was in excellent spirits. He was prepared to listen — he looked shamelessly at a watch that bulged his pocket like an apple when he put it back — for twenty minutes. It's long enough! he thought ironically. He made himself comfortable behind his desk and half closed his eyes to be able to see farther into the dark wood of Thiviers's mind. He expected any monster. Even a unicorn. Certainly a unicorn. He was not disappointed. The fable appeared at the right moment, with the lowing note in Thiviers's voice when he began talking about the moral crisis. We're within a second or two of regeneration, Labenne thought. Here it comes! The fable bent its single horn, and an extremely small dove sidled along it. Thiviers's voice trembled a little.

“. . . how true it is! In suffering, in trials, France, poor fallen daughter, will find a soul. I'm sure of it.”

"Certainly, Monsieur de Thiviers, certainly," Labenne said. He settled himself in his chair. "You find that a consolation?"

He had a trick, when he found it difficult to believe that the person in front of him was real, of picturing him as he would look if suddenly he were run over or otherwise mortally hurt. Astonishing this change which took place. Death, inserting itself in the body, forced out instantly all the lies and affectations of life. Without its ballast of impudence, the poor body shrank; the face becoming smaller had room for only a few emotions, and those the earliest and simplest, pain, hope, fear. No face, even of your most despicable enemy, did not become in this moment, if only for a moment, innocent. Where were its sins? What would God the Father find to judge? Labenne looked at Thiviers and thought: You are dying. At once the other's amply-nourished body fell in; his face, colourless, became a mask of simple nobility. Labenne looked at it again. What am I dreaming about? he smiled: it's merely null, a bag of nothing — in one corner of the bag, a little dust which was all Thiviers's eloquence, piety, family traditions. For the matter of that, all his family.

I can get rid of him any day I want to, Labenne thought.

Thiviers, who did not know he was buried, made a sharp comment on Bergeot.

"Yes, yes, you're right about him," Labenne agreed. "But he's not merely unreliable. He's a climbing viper." He grinned. "And his Madame de Freppel — what a tart, eh?"

He scratched joyfully below his arm-pit. But while he was abusing Bergeot he felt a secret impulse of pity for him. Compared with the elegant tombstone in front of him, what a good chap — with living blood in his veins. Almost as coarse as mine, Labenne thought. He grinned again with pity. His primitive sympathy for the Prefect — a peasant seeing his enemy's fields spoiled — made him suspect a weakness hidden in Bergeot's soul. He believed it would gape open one day and Bergeot be squeezed to death. And therefore Bergeot was useless, a man to be avoided for fear he touched you. Or to be removed.

He smiled at Thiviers.

"Forgive me, won't you, my dear fellow? I have an appointment in half an hour. With General Piriac. He

wants to see me before he dines. So long as he doesn't ask me to dinner ! A cutlet and a glass of the thinnest Vouvray. And I'm not a monk ! . . .”

He walked to the barracks. Piriac greeted him with simple friendliness. In his soldier's poor cell he was less the soldier and more, far more, the Girondin squire. Not merely his nose for weather — he had only to poke it outside to smell the rain in a clear sky — but his tricks of speech were taken down from his father and grandfather, not from lectures at the Staff College. It happened to him often to come back to this cell a few minutes before dark and imagine that he was going to step into the gun-room of the house above Bourg-sur-Gironde. A cell woven clumsily of his memories slipped itself inside the first. Sometimes he put his hand on the wall at a place where there should have been a shelf holding a book, miserably dog-eared, on the diseases of horses, and a leather game-bag, and drew it back puzzled. He had taken to sending to Bourg-sur-Gironde for friendly things he remembered, a crop or a jar of home-made wax for boots. His room began to smell of the small landowner and, close to the Loire as it was, of the Gironde.

As soon as he came in, Labenne recognised the smell ; his self-confidence changed queerly. It was not that Piriac impressed him — not in the least. But the Labenne who was the son of a village butcher felt unwilling respect for the landowner of the village, with his simplicities, his greed, his innocent arrogance. It had only to do with his body. It did not embarrass the other Labenne's vulpine mind.

Piriac's simplicity baffled him. It was a little like looking into a pool so clear that your glance can only turn back and enter your eyes. To be really useful to Labenne, the old general should have a vice which could be gratified, at the very least, a vanity. But Piriac was notoriously without vices. As to vanity, Labenne hoped to pick up the scent — it was not possible that the old general was without vanities — in this room. Dilating his nostrils even further, he smelled beeswax, and the quinces that Piriac's sister dried and sent him to keep among his drawers and nightshirts.

Piriac had sent for him to question him about Bergeot.

“ The Prefect,” Labenne said, “ is an ambitious man.”

“ Yes, yes,” Piriac said. “ But that's not necessarily evil. Do you imagine that Foch was not ambitious ? Is he reliable ? Politically. What is your view ? ”

‘He is unreliable,’ Labenne said.

Piriac’s face, even in its folds, had kept the freshness of youth, but youth mortally weighted by a mass of aged flesh and rigid bones. He stared in front of him, vacantly. Does he know what he’s saying? the Mayor wondered. Why doesn’t he ask me for my evidence? Leaning forward to look into Piriac’s face, he said,

“He is immoral.”

Piriac drew his mouth into folds as severe as a shroud. “I know. And I used to respect him.” After a struggle, his face became almost animated. “Only men with clean hands and a pure heart ought to govern France.”

“Of course.”

“I’m glad you understand me,” Piriac said. His voice, precise and heavy, balanced his words as though he were dropping cartridges from one hand to the other. “I don’t like self-indulgence — a man who refuses discipline. Nor actors. Since my eyes were opened, I’ve noticed that Monsieur Bergeot has something of the actor about him.”

“I agree,” Labenne murmured.

“Insincerity,” Piriac said, “is worse than a fault. It is sin. Mr. Mayor, this ordeal we are going through cannot be met by rebellious undisciplined men. We must say our prayers. We must obey. We must become simple. You understand me — like that good little daughter, that good captain.” His voice stopped awkwardly to caress his thoughts. “You understand, Mr. Mayor, that to know her I haven’t needed to read about our Saint Joan. I haven’t needed to make myself a scholar to know that she was an honest girl, she knew she had only to do as her voices told her and that would be her duty, to France. . . . I, too, have my voices. Of course, they are soldiers’ voices. I am not Joan of Arc. Not a saint. But I have my comrades. Monsieur Labenne, I knew Foch.”

He was silent. Labenne did not answer at once. He had first to master his excitement. A ray of light had plunged into the baffling shallows of Piriac’s mind. I’ve got it, he thought; I’ve got him. The old general’s simplicity had grown out of a pride so monstrous that it deceived the eye. Since it had only a single gesture, it seemed modesty itself, simplicity itself. Austere, living in this cell like a country gentleman of poor means turned monk, he allowed himself one pleasure: the most voluptuous

imaginable. He believed, at seventy, that he had a future. In this world, you understand. He believed he was destined. Naturally, since the century makes a difference, it would show itself in some other way than with Joan of Arc. But even so, Labenne thought, he dreams of crowning a king. Or does he want to crown himself? No, no, of course not — that would spoil his illusion of modesty. The very root — he had just seen it — the deeply sunk root, of Piriac's life was that he saw himself as modest and simple, an honest child who has only to do as God, or Foch, tells him, and it will be his duty. His life — the paradox of a stupefying pride speaking the simple language of piety. To make use of him, you had only to take the place of Foch and press boldly on his sense of his duty.

"Yes," Labenne said at last, in a quiet voice, "you convince me, General. Our country must suffer and repent. We must return, as you say, as children, to our past and our knees."

Pleasure in the ease with which he could control Piriac swelled in him. He did not let himself enjoy it. I must, he thought, be very sincere and quiet.

Piriac lifted a nerveless heavy hand and laid it on the mayor's arm. It lay there like the dead.

"You are a good Frenchman," he said, "an honest man; as honest as a Frenchman. I can rely on you."

"I'm a peasant, you know," Labenne said.

"Ah, our hard-working French peasants. They have their faults, the scoundrels, but they're the salt of the country. I love them as if they were my sons."

You have no son, Labenne thought. He said, with respect and a touch of robust humour, "Then, General, I am one of your sons. Count on me to be obedient."

"Good," Piriac said.

The weight of his hand was something even for Labenne. He stiffened the muscles of his arm.

"And Seully?" he said. "Our old streets — the Abbey Church — the Prefecture — are they going to be knocked down by German bombs?"

Piriac's room was in an angle of the building; it was growing dark in it already, on a brilliant May evening. The shadows of the walls reached even to Labenne, who was sitting nearest the window; and they were falling across the game-bag, the envelope full of dried thyme, the other

humble memories. Piriac asked him abruptly to turn on the lamp. Labenne placed it on the sill, and now it was his own shadow which dominated the room, pinning down the old general's hands on his desk and spreading a black pool over the bed.

"Horrible," Piriac murmured. The lines of his face contracted very slightly — a thought tugging them a great way below the surface. Or perhaps it was Foch? "We must spare them. They must be spared somehow."

"But if Seuilly has to be fought in," Labenne said firmly, "like Arras. Or like Ypres in the last war. Or any part of the country which was occupied. You remember they destroyed the fruit trees when they went back last time, and blew up châteaux from spite."

Piriac looked at him with a delicate assurance. "We must pray. I am sure General Weygand is praying. I trust — but can one really trust it? — that the Prime Minister is praying. And you and I must do our duty."

Labenne realised that he had been dismissed — as abruptly as Piriac's father would have sent away one of his tenants. He got up and stood a minute as if thinking deeply.

"Whatever you order me to do, I'll do," he said in a warm voice. "I want only to help you, General. So far as the civilian administration is concerned — count on my aid and loyalty. I'm entirely yours."

He went out. The corridor was crudely lighted and smelled like a harness room: it would be a long time before any newer smell overbore this ancient scent of leather and elbow-grease. A soldier passed him carrying Piriac's supper, one small cutlet, a roll, a bowl of salad, a carafe of cloudy yellow wine and a beaker of water. Dare he add wine to the fumes already in his head? thought Labenne.

Outside, the daylight flicked him like a hot wind. The stones, a bench, every object which had not been touched by Piriac's mysticism, burned in its own light. He crossed the courtyard where a groom was leading, in the widest circle possible, at the slowest pace, a mare which belonged clearly to one of those lines crossed with a gazelle, known only to mediaeval painters. Its movements, and those of the groom, had become instinctive through a ritual fixed generations ago. They must, Labenne thought, have been stepping round here during the last invasion, and the one

before ; and the one before that. What nonsense ! Time it was stopped. . . . In the perpetual shadow of one corner, a chestnut was still flowering. Which century am I in now ? he thought drily ; I've just left the fifteenth, was it ? And which war ?

He walked to the office of the *New Order*. The door was open and the editor's room empty. A letter lay on the desk. Labenne picked it up and began reading half-way down the page.

" . . . the bed of tarragon. Clear days, with no wind. I've been sent, from Paris of course — who else gets these ideas ? — a document assuring me that there is more nutrition in a kilo of mushrooms than in a whole ox. I shall buy a kilo of mushrooms instead of an ox, it will be cheaper to keep. The valley looks kind, also the vines and wheat. Given fine weather, we shall have a decent harvest. I am only sorry you are not here to enjoy the air, which is stronger here than where you are. Like our wine. Don't talk to me about your outlandish Angevin growths. . . . As for the war. Pray heaven none of our vines, not even the wretched little vineyard outside Nantes belonging to your mother's cousin, sees a Boche. Remember . . . "

Labenne turned the page.

" . . . La Fontaine — *J'aime mieux les Turcs en campagne, Que de voir nos vins de Champagne* — much as I despise modern champagne — *Profanés par les Allemands*. . . . "

The Turks — that's me, Labenne grinned. . . . He knew that his clerks spoke of him as " our carpet-seller " and of his hat as a fez. . . . No land I get my hands on is going to be, what's the word ?, desecrated by Germans. . . .

He dropped the letter. Derval came in. Labenne was amused to see him whisk it out of sight under the blotting-paper. He asked for the petty cash book and went carefully through the items. Five francs were unaccounted for since last Monday. He scolded Derval like a peasant, like one of the women he used to hear haggling with his father over the price of a few bones. The young man hung his head and pouted, almost crying with mortification. Taking no notice of him, Labenne said,

" Now, my boy, your orders. After tomorrow we're going to make patriots — for our Saint Eustache-Anne Piriac de la Gironde to lead to Orléans. . . . "

He paused and spread his arms. His shirt flew out from

humble memories. Piriac asked him abruptly to turn on the lamp. Labenne placed it on the sill, and now it was his own shadow which dominated the room, pinning down the old general's hands on his desk and spreading a black pool over the bed.

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He paused and spread his arms. His shirt flew out from

the band of his trousers like a flag, a nearly white flag. He gave Derval a look of malice. "Monsieur Derval, what is it you want? Do you want to live in the provinces all your life? Speak out."

Derval hesitated. He felt afraid of Labenne. A terrible current of energy sprang from his gross body across France, sweeping away trees, vineyards, human beings; an arm flung up clutching a tattered Horace. . . . He shivered. Can I keep my head above it?

"I've always wanted to edit a Paris newspaper," he murmured. He had the impression that he was plunging into space.

"Why not?" Labenne said, with a smile. "Under a new régime you'll make an excellent editor. None better." He smiled more broadly. "But you must promise me. No quotations. No classics. No — what's the fellow's name? — no Monsieur la Fontaine."

Chapter 39

FRIDAY, May 24th. In the evening an Inspector — of the Political Police — called on Mathieu. He was an old ally. It would be absurd to speak of a friendship; the Inspector himself would not have used the word of an association founded — on his side — in deep respect. And on Mathieu's side? Without feeling any affection for the man who had for years been taking risks to warn him when one of the lines run out by politicians and their friends and patrons was going to foul an essential line of decency and justice, Mathieu relied on him.

He moved the chairs in his room so that the Inspector could sit with his back to the light, and — sign of supreme trust — seated himself first, thus throwing away the advantage his severe formality gave him over his visitors.

He was happy this evening. His happiness puzzled him. He could not find a name for what he felt; he explained it by an unusual weakness in his muscles; he had difficulty in holding himself upright. He was restless. As soon as the

Inspector began talking, he got up, and ran his fingers along the row of books. He straightened the map marking the old provinces of France, the only ornament — it was properly an idol — in the room. In black, his lean body and grotesquely long arms spread across the map, he seemed as anxious as a spider. He sat down, and listened to the Inspector telling him, with more proofs than would have been needed in the High Court to find the accused guilty, that Huet was acting for a peace party which was not entirely a party of Frenchmen.

“ . . . you can say, Monsieur Mathieu, that this animal, this mongrel, has its tail in Paris and its head in Berlin. What a head ! But what a tail ! I ask you, has there ever been such a compound of slime, learning, conceit, as Ernest Huet——”

“ Yes,” Mathieu interrupted. “ It’s a favourite model.” He lifted his hand. “ I don’t call traitors those poor fools who sell something for money, and are invariably cheated.”

“ Talking of money . . . our Deputy pours at every lamp-post. I know the precise figures. To tell you the truth, the man I have in that house is not stupid, I can rely on him. And I happen to know it’s not his wife’s money. There are times — no one knows why — when she keeps him very short. This is one of them. But he spends, on the lice who carry his typhus, ten times more than his income. . . .”

Suddenly Mathieu interrupted again. He pointed to a small kitchen jar on the table, holding a handful of flowers.

“ My landlady left those here,” he said. “ What do you call them ? ”

The Inspector was stunned ; he pulled himself together.

“ They’re pinks.”

“ Indeed ! . . . Go on, please,” Mathieu said sternly.

A little unsettled, as if he had laid his hand on a rug, and felt it move and walk off, the Inspector recited a list of the sums of money Huet had sent abroad in the last month. And a second list for Georges Labenne. He repeated “ abroad ”. . . . Mathieu saw a square in a German city, filled with sunlight which sprang either from the blue sky or from a fountain in the middle ; women selling jonquils and daffodils, every colour of gold in their starved fingers, stood close under the fountain ; for the only time in his life he bought flowers, and walked off carrying them into

a street where everything, including his heart, beat at a smooth light pace. What did I do with them ? he wondered ; I can't have carried them far. . . . He realised that there had been a silence ; the Inspector was waiting. He had to make the effort to feel ruthless. He only felt a strange lightness, as though wherever he had dropped his jonquils twelve years ago he had let fall a burden, a distress. But why only notice it now ?

" I shall expose them in the *Journal*," he said.

" Another thing," the Inspector said. " Labenne and our deputy are using every line leading to the Minister that they can lay hands on, and threatening the magistrate with an old scandal — poor sinner, he might have hoped it was sprouting by now — and flattering him — Madame Huet has gone so far as to call on his wife. All to get a provisional release for Edgar Vayrac. You know how provisional it will be. Provisional on the Day of Judgement."

Release. The word rolled across Mathieu's mind, and split open ; light poured from it in a dozen jets, he felt a spasm of joy. When will he be released ? Joachim von Uhland's voice began one of its precise measured sentences — So I have you to thank. . . .

" Vayrac ? " he said, in a brutal voice. " I can settle him. Once, when I was in Germany, I saw a large rat nailed by a farmer to a post — it was alive still. But in fact I would only shoot Vayrac."

They are both cruel, thought the Inspector. Mathieu and Vayrac. But Vayrac enjoyed the act of cruelty, he would torture the weak, where Mathieu would attack rudely and directly the strong criminal and threaten the weak like children with one more chance. " I shan't," he said slowly, " be able to protect you if Messrs. Labenne and Huet retaliate. They are both well placed to retaliate."

Mathieu was not interested. His eyes, fixed coldly in front of him, rested on the map pinned above his desk ; he was searching for the joint — surely not between Anjou and Touraine ? — through which treachery had slipped into the country. He had not explained it to himself yet. He thought he had seen this war without illusions. He knew that in the last hundred years France had grown continually weaker : contemptuous and ignorant of the ideas of other peoples, it had let its own become dry and brittle ; it lived in them like an ageing woman who sees that her skin has lost its resilience,

but she can do nothing. Without belief none rises from the dead; and France believed in nothing except its past. So that its past was its grave, only its grave. . . . And knowing all this, knowing the extremity of the danger, and knowing that his countrymen were clinging to the hope of peace as a woman to her dead child, he expected the war to be fought with the courage and tenacity he felt in his own ridiculous body, he the Jew. He had no reason for believing except belief, which with him, and where France was concerned, was an instinct. But he had no reason for not believing — since everything in France which was not mortal, its gaiety, its sense of the possible, its human logic, was opposed at the salients to what in the enemy was weakness and a disease; civility was opposing barbarity. He believed that civility is the stronger.

He had been crushing one of his landlady's pinks. He dropped it. Again he felt the muscles of his chest and his wrists giving way. This time, but he did not know it, what he had felt was pity.

"And there are leakages of information to the enemy," said the Inspector.

"There are always leakages," Mathieu said curtly. "They occur between the Cabinet and the sort of staff officer who from vanity can't keep his tongue quiet."

"I daresay." The Inspector hesitated. A little nervously, looking at the window — there was nothing to see; Mathieu's room faced the wall of a dark court — he spoke about a certain Sadinsky, an alien whose papers and credentials, he was sure, were forgeries. He was sure, but he could not prove it; the man had powerful protectors. He had been brought in by a fellow-countryman, also a doubtful type, who had a Minister as intimate friend. Unknown to himself, the Minister was now protecting Sadinsky. And it was precisely this Sadinsky who in a few weeks had become the business associate of Mme Vayrac and Georges Labenne.

Mathieu's feeling of weakness vanished.

"Now you're talking of real corruption," he said. "Nothing is more corrupt than a bad Jew, because nothing is nobler than a good one. In another week, you'll find him embracing Monsieur Huet."

"The war is going badly," the Inspector said gently.

Mathieu did not answer. He glanced at the map. He knew almost to a field which provinces of France had passed

to Germany; the Germans had reached the sea, no doubt they were already, though the wireless was silent about it, across the Somme. More than treachery had passed through the joint: cruelty, evil, death—and the blood of the innocent and guilty pouring out to make room.

“Did you hear the Prime Minister on the wireless, Monsieur Mathieu? France, he said, cannot die; if he were told that only a miracle could save us he would reply: I believe in miracles because I believe in France.” The Inspector smiled slyly. “You don’t accept miracles?”

Mathieu lifted his head. He said coldly,

“But, my dear sir, there are two sorts. The false miracles—which are not miracles at all, but a dialect of nature. They spring out in the moment when an historic force crosses a current of human courage, and you get the so-called miracle of the Marne. Or of human cowardice—and what you got then was the miracle of Munich. . . . And there are the few, the very few, real miracles—which are acts of pure grace.”

He stopped suddenly. The door, he thought, will open, tomorrow evening or morning, and he will see the kind of room I live in, at least as shabby but not so cold as his in Berlin. . . . This was the only time he realised the poverty of his room.

The Inspector had hidden his stupefaction when Mathieu’s harsh voice, colder and sharper than usual, dropped the word grace. He stood up to go. Mathieu allowed him to open the door himself. He did not even, as he always did for his visitors, stand on the landing with the stump of candle he kept ready to save them from breaking their necks on the dark staircase.

As soon as he was alone, he began clumsily and gently to arrange the room. He pulled chairs away from the wall, and tidied book-shelves. The furniture was not his, he had nothing of his own. Without looking at it, he had taken this room and the tiny bedroom opening from it because they were near his office. Now he saw that the room was not simply shabby, it was mean and pretentious. The worst taste could not have created such a wretched place; it must be an accident that nothing in it was solid, or charming, or clean except on the surface. The oil stove which warmed it a little in winter was rusty. His books, instead of offering an air of scholarship, might be lying there to be sold off. He

felt ashamed. After another minute or two of ungainly effort, he lost interest. At least, in this room he was free. In no room in France was freedom more at home. If Joachim did not notice it, if he only noticed shabbiness and bourgeois poverty, so much the worse for him.

He was surprised to find he could not work. He went out. After his room facing the damp shaft, he felt the hands of the evening warmth passing over his face. He noticed a woman in tears. A workman, so tired that the layer of dust on his clothes seemed weighing him down, and a young soldier on leave — certainly his son, he had the same hurt patience, the same hands curved round the glass — were sitting at a table outside a café. The father lifted his head. "Good-evening, Monsieur Mathieu," he said. Mathieu halted beside the table. He wanted to say something, but in the end all he did was press on the young man's thin shoulder as though he expected the words to spring out. I must be ill, he thought, walking on. Never in his life had so many emotions, joy, bewilderment, pain, brushed him, and left this seared blister. He had never before seen. His eyelids felt bruised. His ears and his head were both throbbing.

Without knowing how he came to be there, he was in the courtyard of the Prefecture. The porter told him that the Prefect was still at work. He went in.

Bergeot spoke to him with a friendliness which he felt was put on, and not easily. At once his new senses hardened. His everyday sight — only capable of seeing the angle at which the man or woman in front of him was leaning away from frankness, or honesty, or good faith — swung back like a shutter.

"I came to tell you," he said sharply, "that I shall attack Huet for keeping his money abroad."

Bergeot looked at him attentively. "Why?"

"It's the best way of discrediting him."

"Why do you want to discredit him?" the Prefect said, frowning.

"Because he's a defeatist. And therefore a grave danger."

Bergeot began to set out all the excellent reasons for discretion at this time, the bad effect on morale if the deputy himself were shown to have so little confidence in victory. He was promising to have Huet watched when suddenly

Mathieu's face was convulsed, his lips trembling and his eyes dilated. Bergeot was taken aback. He thought Mathieu must be going to have a stroke.

"Are you ill?"

Mathieu shook his head. He had not heard a single word of the other's excuses. The moment Bergeot began speaking an access of tenderness had closed his ears and opened others. He leaned forward lightly.

"Thank you for agreeing to release Captain von Uhland."

Bergeot stared and made a confused gesture. Jumping up he put his arm round Mathieu's shoulders — the first time anyone had felt able to take such a liberty — and led him towards the door.

"Don't thank me," he said. "Nonsense, it's nonsense. . . ."

Chapter 40

ON Sunday morning, after a night with barely an hour of real darkness, and under a sky still without clouds, the French — those who had slept — woke to find they had lost Calais, the Vimy Ridge, and fifteen generals sacked as more than normally incompetent. The rumours, the evasions, the deaths were declared in a light without nuances, so that the spectators could not make a mistake. If in spite of the clearness many of them did, it must have been their own fault. Never was there less excuse for that purely human stupidity which sees to it that we understand when it is too late. Wishing to destroy, the gods only have to begin by telling us the truth — with the result, in its way charming, that instead of coming to the catastrophe through tears, suspense, terror, hope, we come to it through fine sentiments, interviews with comic characters, soothing words, jokes about a statesman's umbrella, and these, and only these, lead to the final scene where for decency's sake blood runs and some poor wretch dies.

Very early that morning Labenne was rung up from Paris. His informant — one of Daladier's right-hand men — gave him the news and said excitedly, "And now what?"

"If you don't know," Labenne answered, "I advise you to ask the General Staff."

He put the receiver down. He was expectant and calm. He had known for a long time that the war was lost. On September 3, 1939, when many people were still hoping that, apart from a few thousand or a few million Poles, no one would have to die in a war, he knew that a French war was inevitable. And each time a Minister spoke serenely of the country's strength in its trial, he knew that sentence had been passed already and on a terrible weakness. He knew this morning that defeat was not going to be delayed by any river or any miracle. If there were any distortion in Labenne's mind, it was on the side of reality. He saw things with great distinctness, but all absurdly small. Towns, villages, men, became toys he could move. If, at any time in the future, he came a cropper it would be through misjudging the amount of blood in a few of these tiny figures. At present he felt himself master of the puppet-play. While the two little armies, one noticeably smaller than the other, rolled over the toy villages, crossing threads of water which carried immense names — Sambre, Aisne, Somme — along the dusty lines drawn between the little poplars and chestnuts or between the postage stamps of corn and beet, cracking the insect-like bodies fallen aside or jerked along with arms hanging over the edge of toy carts, Labenne felt himself very close to the moment when he would step forward to take Seuilly and the Department under his protection. And after that Anjou, and Touraine, the garden of France . . . as — before Labenne could stop him — Rabelais said. And after that, why not?, France, *le plus beau pays d'avant le jugement* — as Péguy said. . . . No doubt of it, all the quotations he had exiled from the language were waiting their turn somewhere, to approach him. And not as friends. Perhaps as avengers, as executioners. In the final scene — when everything, the rivers, the villages, the men, assume for him their real size. When he will not be able, his shadow falling across a province, to lean over a thousand of them at once. . . .

This morning he took his children to Thouédun, to the château, still being swept and garnished for him to live in. They drove through sunlight brushed on the road and trees like an enamel. He stopped the car on the bridge over the young river, so that the children could lean on the stone parapet and try to see water-lilies in the thick forest of

plants. The sun was drawing up the scent of an acacia ; earlier, there had been a few sounds, a bird, a child crying ; now suddenly all was still ; the heat flowed everywhere, rising above the tops of the trees, falling down both sides of the sky. The leaves of the water-plants moved : a trout weaving from side to side in the greenish darkness. You can be sure — the only innocent web being woven that morning.

Half-way up the road to the village a lane leading to the château was masked by trees. An innocent mask — the only one in France. The entrance was severe, a pointed arch below a high double tower, but in the inner courtyard all this severity broke down in surprises and fantasy. On the left, in a charming disorder, were two groups of buildings : a little castle of the fifteenth century with miniature towers, and a mediaeval kitchen superbly giving itself the airs of a mosque. You never know where the memory of the crusades is going to break through in France. His kitchen delighted Labenne. He intended to use it as a dining-room, with the food served directly from an immense modern range behind a glass screen, so that his guests could watch their rows of ducklings and capons being basted, their eels stewing in wine, and their pike and salmon baked. A single innocent ambition ? . . . Opposite, on the right of the courtyard, the château flung up the six stages of its staircase tower, its turrets, pinnacles, chimneys. It was the past talking about its memories, with a charm, with a strong friendliness, which did not exclude Labenne. Overlooking his manners and his reputation, it behaved to him kindly and civilly. Was this innocence on its part, or a deep careless complicity ?

He let the children run about the gardens, following them to see that neither of them went bareheaded in this sun. A breath of air came from the lowest terrace, from the stream, to be pushed back by the scent of herbs and roses. The vines were at the other side of the deep valley ; already Labenne was dissatisfied with the lightness and flinty taste of his wine, and planning a nursery with earth fetched from Saint-Georges-sur-Loire. . . . " We'll see which Georges is the greater saint," he said to Henry. . . . A pigeon circled slowly, slowly, round one of the islands in the centre of the stream : it must have been finishing off a charm of some sort ; at the end of the third turn it flew clumsily across the valley into the trees below the vines. The boy clapped his

hands and pretended to fire at it.

"Quiet, be quiet," his father said, "you'll get overheated."

Henry looked at his sister and laughed. His father came between them; he rested one hand on the boy's shoulder, feeling him stiffen proudly to take the weight, and put his other arm round the girl. In the last weeks she had grown a little shy of him. Her thin flesh drew closer to the fine bones. Half angry, he insisted, pressing his hand up under her little breast. She escaped adroitly, running from him to pull with her thin arms at the branch of an acacia. Labenne felt in his body a fearful weight of pleasure and rage, the rage of the father, the pleasure of the young man she would not try to evade. And afterwards she would not be so shy with her father — and he would care much less for her.

When he looked at Henry he felt only joy. It blinded him. He glanced over his shoulder at the château with its boldly rounded towers. . . . Look at me ! Labenne father of Labenne. . . . Henry would marry and have one son and three or four daughters. The daughters would marry into modern steel or banking dynasties ; the son would inherit : or of two sons the younger might go into the Church — why not ? — the Church is still a power. . . . Labenne father of Labenne. Labenne father of Cardinal Labenne. Labenne father of His Holiness. . . . A gross laugh choked him. He was forced to laugh for a moment at his ambitions — not because he thought them absurd, but he was bursting with pride. His will equalled his appetites. He would never lose his hunger and he would die reaching his hand out. What Labenne son of Labenne could ask a better death ?

Henry moved away. "Why have you bought this place ?" He knew ; he wanted his father to tell him.

"For you."

"And Cécile ?"

"No," Labenne said. He seized the girl's arm with a cruel tenderness. "No. Cécile will have a château of her own."

"Where ? When ?"

"When she marries."

Henry burst out laughing. His laugh was a young fresh echo of his father's. I'm bequeathing good habits, Labenne thought. It delighted him to think that his laugh would

run on through the generations, long after he had ceased to smile — and with it his trick of rolling his lips, blinking heavy eyelids, raising an eyebrow. There is more than one immortality. He would be content to have them all.

"Then it won't be hers," Henry said.

"It will," Labenne said tenderly. "Cécile is my daughter."

Henry looked slyly at his father. With a touch of malice. Labenne had bequeathed other habits.

"Have you seen today's *Journal*?"

"I don't get my news from the *Journal*," Labenne said, "there's nothing worth reading in it."

"There's this."

He took the single sheet from his pocket and handed it to his father with an excited smile. On the back page was an article headed: We Accuse. . . . Mathieu had inherited a habit. . . . It was a savage attack on Labenne. It accused him of cowardice, treachery, lying. He read it twice, the first time with resentment, the second with pure grief that his son had read these . . . these slanders. He looked at Henry. The boy was innocence itself — that is, malice, a child's innocence. Labenne frowned, and folded the paper, carefully; it was a crime.

Lowering his head, the boy mumbled,

"They oughtn't to write about you like that."

"But none of it's true," Labenne said calmly.

Henry's chin trembled, he could not keep back his tears. "Throwing himself furiously against his father, he butted him in the chest with his head. "You're going to kill Germans, aren't you?" he shouted. "You'll do it, you'll save everyone?"

Labenne stroked his head. "Of course, yes, of course I shall," he said. I must get rid, he thought drily, of Mathieu. It's too much of a good thing.

Chapter 41

ERNEST HUET'S mind was a map, in slavish detail, of legal finance. Marked on it, the turns of every path along which a bank or a financial house can climb above the control of society. He could have run quickly up any of the interlaced flights of stairs leading by way of tobacco, petrol, insurance, to the Council of the Bank of France. His ambitions went beyond this. He cared nothing for money, helping himself lavishly to his wife's only because he needed it. What he wanted was the most reputable form of power. To become Minister of Foreign Affairs would gratify at once his social vanity, his itch to prove himself subtle and implacable, and his passion for intrigue. This had become part of his nervous system. Entirely without charm, even as a baby, he was left about by parents who had the best reasons in the world for disliking each other. His mother, an egoist by profession, and an amateur poet, detested him. In any surroundings his vanity would have given him trouble, but this infected it for life, and all during a neglected childhood passed in the least pleasant town in Touraine he soothed it with endless tortuous day-dreams. At school these took a definite form — Richelieu. He read all the books about his hero, true and false, preferring quite naturally the false, and he grafted on to his skinny body what he took to be the voice and gestures of a great man. They made him ridiculous. His acquaintances — he had no friends ; his anxiety only to know useful people killed a spontaneous growth — laughed at him behind his back. According to his need of the moment, he bored them by repeating his talks with other and greater men, or with an irritating air of condescension he asked favours.

There are only too many men in whom intellect and singleness of purpose are not distinguishable from aridity and servility : Huet was one. His brain served him only to gorge second-hand facts, his strength of will fastened on useful people like a leech — and besides, he looked like a leech — and clung there in spite of insults and even ridicule. He had grown a complacent skin. Successive failures taught him nothing except that he was more honest than other

politicians. In its turn, his conviction of his honesty let him play any shabby trick, and disguised it for him as an act of virtue and foresight. There were no limits to the deceit and treachery he could allow himself, since both were in the service of his noble mind. His fellows did not recognise this yet? Then for their own good they must be forced, by lies where possible, to see the truth.

Sometimes a man, or more often a woman, hearing him made fun of and snubbed, was seized by pity for him. After they had watched him, they took it back: no one, they felt, could swallow so many insults; he must be immune to them. And in fact it was these same persons, who had been kind to him, whom he despised, and when he could, injured.

Émile Bergeot had once helped him. Only from vanity, Huet had become involved in the criminal behaviour of a Seuilily landowner. He was going to be disgraced. At some risk, the Prefect interfered — sorry for a man who came to him in tears — and managed to cover up Huet's share in the scandal. The deputy had never forgiven him.

This Sunday afternoon, on his way to call on Bergeot, he thought about him with voluptuous dislike. Smiling a little, he fingered the dangers threatening the Prefect. He was almost tempted to show off his sources of information by warning him. He rejected the temptation. He wanted the sharper pleasure of watching Bergeot ruin himself.

Left alone for a moment by Lucien Sugny, he leaned forward at once to read the letter lying on the desk; it was nothing. When the Prefect came in he was sitting with finger-tips pressed together, head sunk above them in thought. He started. Without rising from his chair, he held out a limp hand.

"Ah, Bergeot," he drawled, "how goes civil defence? You're quite the local hero. The Gambetta *de nos jours*. Or so I'm told."

Bergeot was amused by this naïve malice. "What can I do for you, my dear deputy?"

Huet was taken aback. In answer to the defiance he expected from Bergeot, he had prepared an epigram on the duties of civilians in war-time. He hesitated and let it go. He added this misconduct to Bergeot's other crimes of *lèse-Huet*.

He waved his hand. "I came, my dear fellow, in the first place to give you a warning, secondly, of course, for the

pleasure of talking to you." He smiled and blinked. "I refer to the article in the *Journal* on our friend Labenne. Now however you may distrust Labenne — and I don't, you observe, say that you have no reason to distrust him — quite the contrary — but he is in fact Mayor of Seuilly, and as such — mark me, I say as such — ought not to be accused of anti-social acts. Especially in war-time."

He saw with greedy satisfaction that Bergeot was going to refuse anything he asked. In other people he recognised at sight their impulses to meanness and folly — so eagerly that he was always completely blind to a movement of generosity or wisdom, or imputed it to a base motive.

"What do you expect me to do?" Bergeot said with contempt.

Huet noted the contempt. It did not touch him: he saw in it a tribute to his grandeur of soul. I've frightened him, he thought.

"I didn't come to teach you your business," he said affably. "But surely you're going to advise Piriac to suppress the *Journal*?"

Bergeot allowed himself to be irritated. "Not at all. Why should I?"

Before his visitor came in he had been drafting a letter to Mathieu, scolding him for his indiscretion and warning him that if he persisted in attacking high officials during these critical weeks he would have to be silenced for the sake of order. He decided at this moment to tear it up. Although he knew that by supporting Mathieu he would earn the dislike of more important people, he could not bring himself to do anything for Huet. Since the time he saved the deputy's public life, he had grown wary of him. Besides, he could not look to Huet for any of the favours a successful deputy can offer a Prefect — Huet would never be in a position to make him an Ambassador. Without being able to see anything in him deeper than his vanity and his habit of crawling up to rewards he never reached, Bergeot was revolted by the double odour Huet gave off, of intrigue and failure. The worst was that there was a faint whiff in it of his own ambitions. Perhaps ambition is never decent?

"I'm not going to start suppressing opinion," he said curtly.

"The police—" Huet began in a mild voice.

Bergeot stood up. "I'm too busy to discuss it with

you," he said, without trying to soften the snub. "Sorry, my dear Ernest, I'm afraid I must put you out."

The deputy gave no sign of feeling insulted. Had he not already explained the other's impatience to get rid of him by fear? But he much resented being cut short in the speech—"I am not wedded," it began, "to the belief that freedom inheres in cocking snooks at authority . . ."—he had prepared on the duties of the press in war-time. Hiding it under his air of condescension, he drawled,

"I agree that our dear Labenne is rather a gross character."

"Gross?" Bergeot echoed. "He's not gross, he's a peasant. An unscrupulous grasping peasant. I don't trust him an inch."

Huet paused in the doorway. "You're a cynic, my dear fellow. You, yes, you're really the astute politician; I'm the idealist, I never sell my soul——"

Bergeot shut the door on him.

He hurried off, walking round three sides of the courtyard to avoid crossing it in the open. He had to make a second visit. At the prison. He was on his way to see Edgar Vayrac.

He had known Vayrac for four years—ever since the day when for the first time, with the certainty of a sleep-walker, he saw his way clearly. In this sudden debauch of light he saw all the reasons why he had made so many false moves, rushed into so many blind alleys, courted so many rebuffs. During the whole of his public life he had been seeking his special task, his mission. It must display his intellect, give him unlimited power, and form the monument he wanted to see ready at the end of his life. Before this, he had had several of these flashes of certainty. At one period he knew he was destined to interpret America to France. Demanding letters of introduction from Laval, he visited New York and Washington and talked to a great many important persons who scarcely waited for him to leave before giving orders to a secretary never to admit him again. He hurried home to write a book. It was derided. He gave America up. Let it perish. Retiring for a few months to Seuilly, he began to breed geese until one of them flew at him. He preached a crusade in the press against empty cradles. His eloquence failed to fill one, even of his own.

To his real rage, the anti-clerical newspapers nicknamed him "the aborted papa".

None of his earlier conversions had come to him with the blinding light of his conversion to Hitler. It took place on the very day the Germans marched into the Rhineland. It was a miracle. The blind saw. From that moment — certain now of his monument — he worked for an alliance with Germany. His other intrigues had only been rehearsals for the supreme intrigue of his life. He plunged into it joyously, lavishing his wife's money, offering himself — with only as much caution as was needed to prove his usefulness — as a go-between to the Nazi Government. No sacrifice, of his strength or the political and military information he picked up, was too much trouble. Becoming more of a Nazi than the Nazis who were his patrons, he had no scepticism and no scruples.

At no moment did it enter his head that he was behaving treacherously. His egoism turned all he did and every weakness of his own Government into another proof of his foresight; he advanced step by step to being the complete Nazi tool, all the time believing firmly that each step was an act of supreme political truth. . . . The war surprised him. He had been too busy to notice that it was coming. With his usual clumsiness — the most carefully thought-out of his plans always miscarried, thus giving away his inner deformation — he had fixed the week it broke out for a large dinner-party in Paris in honour of Ribbentrop. The invitations had gone out, and he forgot to cancel them. A single guest — an actress who had never had a success — turned up. Huet had left Paris. Furious, she gave the story to the papers.

In the meantime Huet was in Seuilly. He comforted himself with his knowledge — he had shared it freely with Ribbentrop and Abetz — that the French army was short of munitions. He never faltered in his belief that by conquering Europe Hitler would be behaving in the spirit of the new age. A cold ecstasy filled him with his visions of a Germanic Empire, its capital — where else could it be? — in Paris. Ruled — who else knew so well how to camouflage himself as a statesman? — from behind the throne by the new Richelieu. No more small nations, springing, with their poetry he could not read, and their music — all music was a jargon he could not bear — vigorous and unwrinkled from

the fresh sources of history. No more wild geese. The stiff German eagle would lord it over all the weaker birds. In spite of his present disgrace, he was excited and very happy. . . .

It happened that his meeting with Edgar Vayrac took place on the day of his conversion. An acquaintance in one of the underworlds of finance — he knew someone in each circle — sent Vayrac to him with a message which was too awkward to write. So the young man was associated in his mind with the vision. Vayrac's first words — "I have been sent . . ." — had the tones of fate. He took him under his protection at once.

Huet had two sorts of contacts. When he said contacts he said friendship, profit — the words meant the same thing to him. It was as links between himself and something he wanted that other people showed themselves to him. On one side he wormed or forced his way into the houses of important men, who snubbed him, or used and despised him — when they were not too bored or too honest to do anything but turn him out. On the other, he employed the persons he called his agents. These — he was not exacting — might be criminals turned informer, swindlers with failing hopes of becoming respectable, dope sellers : all of them men who had bungled their lives, and were willing for anything. His vanity saw them as master criminals ; it was only the purity of his motives that made it right for him to use them. Edgar Vayrac became one of his more trusted aides.

When Vayrac got himself into prison Huet was inclined to abandon him. It was a shock to find he had been intimate with a man who made his money out of a low class of brothel and peculations that were not even clever. But very shortly after the arrest, Mme Vayrac told him that her son had no secrets from her. Without allowing himself to think it, he felt that he must either defend his agent or face a scandal ; in the same instant he turned the whole thing to a generous impulse on his part. Poor Vayrac — how he must have suffered !

"Now, now, leave it to me," he consoled Mme Vayrac : "I shall devote myself to rescuing our brave Edgar."

Always at his most affable with the men he had the best reasons to distrust, or meant to betray, he sat close to the brave Edgar in his cell and caressed his arm while he talked. The warder had moved discreetly out of earshot.

Vayrac listened. Now and then he turned his full face to his patron, giving an entirely different view of himself. Seen from the side, his fine jutting nose, high forehead and receding chin, were the sketch for a febrile intellectual. It was wiped out by the full view. Another set of planes formed a severe mask — eyeballs covered for more than half their depth by the lids, long close lips — arrogant and energetic. The swiftness of the change could only mean one thing : there were not two men in his body, but he had pushed his intellect beyond itself in the service of an ambitious brutality. The earthquakes marking the end of an age throw up Vayracs, men devoted to violence, empty of the virtues — pity, disinterest, tolerance — we can afford when we feel safe. In the time of troubles we drive them into monasteries and concentration camps. Vayrac was attractive to many people. In the society which is going to be a victim, there is a nerve which its murderer finds at once. A number of men and women recognised their deaths in Vayrac — with joy. Others, who were afraid, took refuge in pretence. . . . “He can’t be evil ; evil doesn’t exist, it’s a classic myth adopted by the Church. . . .” But that is another myth, dangerous for the victims.

Glancing up at a moment when Vayrac was looking at him, Huet felt a slight shock. There was something disquieting, even cruel, in the face near his. He noticed that Vayrac’s eyes were striped by fine black lines. For some reason this upset him. He drew back. He had been speaking of the charges against Vayrac — so vaguely that you could suppose depravity and treason were only different words for a simple lapse of memory.

Vayrac interrupted him. “Do you know — have you been able to find out — whether anything is known about my last trip into Germany ?”

Huet turned pale. Vayrac’s frankness threw over him the shadow of a real treachery — and he found it difficult to turn it into forethought and love of country. For a moment something faltered in him — his belief that the Republic was so nearly dying that only the virus of German fascism could revive it. Even his vision of himself as a type of higher patriot grew pale. He saw suddenly that in Vayrac’s vocabulary the higher patriotism stood for need of money and a taste for anarchy. . . . It was only for a moment. He blinked, smiled, and saw his agent in a better light.

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"Now don't let's confuse ourselves," he said indulgently. "Certain things had to be done in a certain way at certain times. As soon as things become normal——"

"Do you count on that?" Vayrac interrupted again.

"Explain yourself, my dear fellow."

"Do you really believe," Vayrac said ironically, "that repression won't be needed after a defeat?"

Huet smiled, kindly, almost sweetly. "Come, come, what do you mean by defeat? Define your terms, my boy. Personally — no doubt I have a prejudice in favour of accuracy, my philosophical training, you know — I prefer to call it a fresh start."

Vayrac did not answer. The deputy watched him with a faint anxiety. He was surprised by the look of astonished contempt on Vayrac's face. Vayrac looked away.

"What have you been able to do for me?" he asked drily.

"Ah," Huet said with complacency, "I flatter myself I've achieved a great deal. My friend in the Cabinet" — he smiled warningly and lifted his hand — "has talked to the Minister; that foolish fellow, Maître Naquet, has been informed — by me — of his duty; and Thiviers, dear old Thiviers, is pressing hard on Madame de Freppel." He added roguishly, "I must say I don't approve of feminine interference — in general. In particular, my dear boy, it is not unuseful." A mental tic made him prefer the negative form, especially a faked negative.

"And Labenne?"

Huet was seized by an impulse to make Labenne seem "not untreacherous". He gave way to it instantly.

"When it's to his own interest, Labenne will help you," he said in a grave voice.

"Of course," Vayrac said curtly. He turned his head to look at Huet. "What a clever brute, though."

Chapter 42

THE courtyard of M. de Thiviers's house in Seuilly had a charming fountain attributed to Jean Goujon ; the sculptured frieze running above the ground-floor windows was said to be . . . the niches and bust of the first floor were credibly supposed . . . the clock — but why go on with a list which is unjust to an admirable Louis XVI house, of decent proportions, and mature simple charm. In restoring it, Thiviers had only given way to the mania for authorities which made his books a trickle of text in a desert of footnotes drawn from the most respectable sources. He imagined he had proved his point when he could quote a similar opinion from another writer, and until he had thought of attaching Jean Goujon's name to his fountain he was not convinced that it was fine and delicate.

He had collected for his library the busts — all, he believed, even the head of Socrates as a young man with a superb youthful beard, authentic — of famous writers and philosophers : sitting among them, himself almost authentic, dictating long falsely exact phrases to his secretary, he pursued these famous shades with his eloquence and cloudy abstractions, so certain of their approval that when a ray of sun touched Bossuet's lips he smiled back at him.

Before Mme de Freppel came in, he had just succeeded in putting together two sentences without joining them by a quotation. He looked at her gravely. His afternoons were slightly sacred to writing. Besides, her finger resting on it threw a doubt on the bust of Ronsard, attributed to . . . He dismissed his secretary, and took both her hands in a friendly grasp.

She freed one hand and tapped him lightly on the cheek. Was she surprised to find it warm ? She drew back.

"My dear, I'm interrupting you."

She was amused. Behind his dignity — almost real, in any case not a wilful fake — he was nervous. The thought : I still disturb him, gave her confidence. Resting her arms on his desk, she faced him across a corner of it, and began with her air of simplicity to talk about Colonel Rienne. He

was — surely ? — dangerous. And his influence made Émile so reckless. . . .

"Can't you get rid of him, my dear Robert ? Have him sent to the front ? Such a fire-eater——"

"In any emergency — don't be anxious — Colonel Rienne will be watched," Thiviers said, with a smile.

He patted her arm. Mme de Freppel seized his hand in both hers and leaned forward so that he found himself looking in her eyes, at the gleam of animal brightness under their soft black. She knew the effect she had on him. She was using her body to subdue him, without shame — you use, or defend, what you have : one woman is quicker to use, another to defend. There were things Mme de Freppel was passionate to defend, but her body was not one of them.

"Tell me what to do," she said with energy. "I'm distracted. You needn't tell me we're going to lose the war. I know. Tell me what I ought to do. I thought of putting everything into diamonds. In New York I could sell them to savages called Smith or Franklin. If we ever get to New York. Do you think diamonds ?"

Thiviers drew his hand away. She was startled. Is he afraid of me ? Or bored ? She watched him, listening with only part of her mind.

"Yes, yes, I know," she interrupted. "You explained days ago that Seuilly can't be defended, if the Germans get here the war's lost, and so on and so on——"

"You didn't take it in," Thiviers said gently. "We expected you to make Émile see reason."

Who does he mean by we ? "What are you talking about ?"

"Émile is almost a criminal——"

"That's not true," she said vehemently.

She checked herself. . . . I mustn't irritate him. . . . To soften her words she gave him an affectionate glance.

"Listen, Marguerite," Thiviers said in a cold voice. "Émile's efforts will land him in prison. I'm serious. If he persists in rousing the mob he will have to be put out of the way for his own sake and the sake of order and stability. Émile — it horrifies me ; I expected so much of him, with his training — you don't look in the Political Science School for anarchists — but he's an anarchist."

He is really horrified, she thought. She felt a baffled

impatience. Why is he so moral? Why must Émile run these insane risks?

"An anarchist who has sent money to the United States," Thiviers added.

She looked at him. "Émile is not the only one," she said calmly.

"No. But he might be the only one to be ruined."

She was silent. She did not feel defeated. Her instincts — she had an instinctive disrespect for men as animals — promised her that she was still partly controlling him. Looking at her hands on the desk, she imagined them, but did not bring herself to it, touching the quilt of soft flesh between her fingers and the bones of his body. Like embracing an adult child. The wave of repulsion starting at the ends of her fingers dragged her back with it. She trembled with a little horror of herself. So far as she was concerned Thiviers's body was dead. She became alert and calm.

"I couldn't face poverty," she said in a frank voice.

Thiviers glanced at her with a curious, almost disinterested respect.

"Why should you be poor? I'm a rich man. You can rely on me to help you. You know that. There's very little you don't know about me."

With both hands she made a gesture of lifting something and letting it fall. A touch of fear came to weaken her. . . . Perhaps I can't use him; he's stronger, less rigid than I imagined. . . . The thought made her angry. Hiding her anger, she said, with a friendly smile,

"You exaggerate Émile's obstinacy. I know him better than you do. I assure you he's very reasonable. I'll talk to him."

She stood up. Thiviers got up more heavily. Only the corner of the desk separated them, and she felt that in a moment he would embrace or insult her. Either act would be fatal to her power over him. She must speak.

"Dear Robert, you're quite charming," she said gaily, "you're a scholar, a philosopher, a banker — what a monster! — but you have very little tact and you simply don't understand less exalted people. You don't know how to talk to us."

She saw, with pleasure, that she had hurt his vanity. He reddened and said stiffly,

"You find me dull, no doubt."

"Not in the least." Her eyes sparkled. Suddenly she felt that her will was stronger than his. The certainty that she would outwit him made her feel madly happy.

She walked towards the door. It opened when she was almost there. Mme de Thiviers came in.

She was in outdoor dress, swaddled in spite of the heat in a thick coat. She was always cold. Leaning the awkward weight of her body on her maid's arm, she moved forward slowly. She looked at Mme de Freppel with contempt.

"I see you're going, Countess," she said. "I regret that I wasn't at home to receive you. I didn't know you did me the honour of calling on me."

"But I came to see your husband," Mme de Freppel said, smiling. "On business."

"I understand," Mme de Thiviers said. "I can choose my callers, my husband cannot choose his business associates."

"Nini——" Thiviers said, alarmed.

"But don't apologise for Madame de Thiviers's awkwardness," Marguerite said in a clear voice. "I can see she is a sick woman."

She knew she was looking remarkably beautiful at this moment, her eyes brilliant, her body giving off its energy. And at this moment of triumph and happiness she made a mistake. Thiviers was holding the door open; as she passed through she let him see that she was laughing at his embarrassment. This second wound to his vanity went too deep. His face became gloomy and he looked at her with an anger he saw no reason to hide. It jumped into his mind that she would make a laughing-stock of him among her friends. It would be too easy, and he knew she enjoyed using her shrewd vulgar wit. Ridicule was the one injury he could not forgive. At this moment he would have sent her to a concentration camp to be punished.

Chapter 43

MARGUERITE walked rapidly through streets filled with Sunday idlers towards the square where she had left her car. She was vexed and anxious. Her fears sharpened as she went. . . . What an idiot I was to smile. . . . She was seized by panic. Her confidence had gone, leaving only dismay. She knew that she had behaved with the greatest folly. Far from making him feel he must help me, she thought, I've offended him. What shall I do? . . . Her mind was becoming feverish. She told the chauffeur to take her home; half-way there she made him turn back to the Prefecture, and there, without getting out, she ordered him to Mme Vayrac's. Léonie will advise me, she thought.

Mme Vayrac was alone. She was cold and constrained. Marguerite felt that a grudge was listening to her, not a close friend. She faltered. At any other time she would have asked Léonie frankly why she was angry, but she was not capable at this moment of behaving frankly or calmly. When she was in a panic, deceit came naturally to her. Panic woke all her inbred cunning; at the same time it so distorted things that her mind flew along any false track — if she had been an animal she would have run straight into the trap.

She began to placate Léonie. Certain that her coldness had to do with Edgar, she said hurriedly,

"Léonie, my dear, I must tell you that Louis Mathieu is doing all he can to harm Edgar. At the Prefecture the other day he warned Émile that Labenne is helping you. He even spoke of poor Edgar as a pro-German. I think it's serious."

Mme Vayrac's eyes became a thought less opaque. "Did Émile tell you?"

"No. I overheard."

She realised that she had involved Émile. A dozen lies, to protect him from Léonie, sprang into her head. But Mme Vayrac did not ask any more questions. Propped against the back of the couch, inert, her body began to give off warmth in place of indifference and suspicion. She spoke kindly.

"My dear girl, you're an angel. I know you try to help

me. My poor boy. . . ." Her eyes became animated. Without their film of mistrust they looked guilty: it was due to use and too much tolerance. "I thought of you yesterday when I was talking to Sadinsky. He asked whether you had been able to do anything for him with Madame Huet. Have you?"

Marguerite felt relieved and thankful. "I think he might offer an impressive cheque—twenty thousand or even fifty thousand francs—to her War Comforts Fund. . . ."

Léonie's body quivered with laughter. "And I think we share a reasonable commission. You know, Sadinsky is quite reasonable. I'll suggest half to Madame Huet, twenty-five per cent each to you and me, my dear Marguerite."

Marguerite's anxiety to please vanished. "But I shall have done everything!" she cried. "It ought to be ten and forty per cent. Really, Léonie!"

"My dear girl, he's my Jew," Mme Vayrac said, smiling.

Marguerite knew she would have to give way. She hid her mortified disappointment under an air of simplicity and good-humour.

"Tomorrow I'm going to Andrée Huet's reception. I'll speak to her about Sadinsky and his offer. You can tell him to come and see me at the Prefecture on Tuesday—"

Léonie raised her eyebrows. She said nothing.

"—or if he rings me up there I'll tell him what I've arranged. He can give you our commission, and you'll send me your cheque."

"Splendid," Léonie said. Now that she was herself, that is, lazy, generous, loose, her voice had recovered its double tones. "You're my good little girl. . . . Are you going? Don't." She got up as she spoke, and walked heavily to the door with her friend. "You didn't buy Sadinsky's diamond," she murmured. "I'm afraid he'll sell it."

Marguerite stood still. She felt exasperated. Was this day of failures going to end with a quite frightful loss? Everything else could be put right, but not this.

"Show it to me again."

She gazed at it cupped in Mme Vayrac's palm and said greedily, "I must have it. A good diamond is the one thing you can feel sure of in these times. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, of course," Léonie smiled.

Chapter 44

LATE in the afternoon of Monday, Bergeot gave his secretary a letter to take to Mme de Freppel at the Manor House. The young man found himself caught in a garden party. The lawns, the formal garden, the orchard, were mined : people chattered round him and sunshades sprang up under his nose like clusters of fungi. Crimson with embarrassment, he blundered among them looking for Mme de Freppel. He found her at last on the lawn between the house and the Loire, and waited while she read Bergeot's note — it was to tell her that he could not possibly keep his promise to come. She crumpled it into her handbag. Looking at the young man, she said with impatience.

"Are you allowed to call your soul your own?"

"Yes. No, madame."

"You don't seem very sure."

"I'm not sure," Lucien said. "But is there anything you would like me to do?"

He spoke respectfully and steadily, he was no longer afraid of her. He blushed, of course, but that was a habit. Mme de Freppel saw that she had lost an adorer. She said cruelly,

"If you think you won't be punished for staying to eat a few strawberries . . ."

He escaped. He had left his motor-cycle in the drive. Just as he reached it a group of women moved out of his way. Catherine was standing there, resting her hand on the saddle. Without wasting a second he laid his hand on hers : he drew it back at once, but it was enough ; Catherine looked at him and said in her quiet voice,

"Poor Lucien, you love me."

She meant : I love you. Lucien shivered, took his glasses off so that he could look at her without seeing her, put them on, and lived during that moment through a long and agonising life of happiness.

"We must walk about," Catherine said hurriedly. "If we stand here my mother will notice us."

A cube of sunlight filled the space between the dry grass and the sky. Impossible to breathe in it. Catherine lifted

her head. Seeing that Lucien had lowered his and was walking like a peasant bent under the sun, she did the same. They crossed to the nearest group of poplars and from there to an acacia, and from there, to keep up a pretence of growing smaller, to the shadow thrown by a bush of laurel.

"If we can go on like this we shall be able to hide behind a cabbage," Lucien said. He stared in front of him, keeping his eyes, which were too small and too blue, on the ground, because he was afraid to look at her. What if she were smiling?

They passed old gentlemen sitting about in couples, the sweat running from their straw hats, and groups of matrons, each keeping one eye on a young girl or two young girls in light frocks. Voices droned under the trees, but in the open stretches of lawn a trance-like silence followed the voices: even the bees could not stand this heat. At the other side of the garden the air was wrinkled by it. . . . There were no young men except Lucien: every eye stung him. He took his glasses off. Now that he saw only faceless statues the stings were blunted. His hand brushed Catherine's: the shock went through his body as though a bolt had been shot home. From her pallor he saw that she had felt it.

Keeping their faces as stiff as possible they talked in ordinary voices, without making a gesture. They said what came into their minds, without trying to live up to the occasion. It was all they could do to breathe at this height.

"We must always be together. . . ."

"I shall be called up next month. . . ."

"Who said?"

"Colonel Rienne has given me a definite promise. I trust him. . . ."

"Look at that bird. . . ."

"You know I can't see it," he said.

"I love you," Catherine said carelessly. She pulled a leaf from the laurestinus.

Drawn along by the terrace, they reached the lawn at the other side of the house. Only half of it was green: at its summer lowest the Loire fed half of the fine earthy web stretched from root to root under the grass; exactly where its strength failed it the blades became brittle and yellow.

"Take this leaf. . . ."

"Will you be able to live on a little money until I become a Colonel?"

Mme de Freppel was sitting at the far side of the cypress. She was talking to M. de Thiviers : her parasol fell on the grass and he bent stiffly to pick it up for her.

" I distrust that man," Lucien said.

" Why ? He only reminds me of a very noble goat we had once. . . ."

" You really will wait until I come back ? "

They walked about slowly, at one moment afraid they were being overheard ; the next, separated by a league of sunlight from everything living, they hurried to throw themselves against the elbows and pointed eyes. Better be listened to than watched. And after all, Catherine thought, we are saying nothing : nothing at all.

" How sandy the river is. Oh ! . . . "

" What's the matter ? "

" You touched me. . . . "

" What is it like ? "

" A burn. . . . "

" Child, oh, my child. . . . "

" Don't look round, my mother has noticed us. . . . "

Catherine lifted her arm to point at a poplar. She yawned. Everyone except her mother would see that she was trying to get rid of a very dull young man. They turned back, plunging from sun to shadow, silence to the rasping babble of voices, hope to terror.

" If you were to be killed . . . "

" Bosh," Lucien said severely, " I can't be."

" Don't say it ! "

She had turned pale. He's mad, she thought. Stubborn, short-sighted. I shall never be able to control him, never. He'll control me. She felt a frightful doubt and an even more frightening joy. They stood a minute under the arch of the courtyard, neither daring to touch the other. Catherine noticed that the shadows striping the light were frayed at the edges, where they had been burned by the sun. They were stammering a word, a single word. I can't hear it, she said to herself : I don't hear anything, we shall be punished. She looked at Lucien without moving her head. He took a step forward ; a ray cut the shadow across his face ; one half stayed sombre, the other glittered as though a sponge had been passed over it. I shall half-lose him, she thought.

" I'm afraid that when I've gone he'll break down."

" Who ? "

"The Prefect, of course. He works himself to death, and he'll be worse without me. . . ."

You imagine he's nearer death than you are? thought Catherine. Idiot. . . . She wanted to laugh. A tear fell on her arm. She looked round, not sure whether it were raining or not. Lucien was looking away.

"I don't," he said, "hate the Germans."

Now why? Why say that? If you don't hate them, she said to herself, how can you kill one of them? She saw him advancing pitilessly, his eyes blurred with kindness behind their glasses, towards the enemy. Towards a poor human being, a poor German Lucien. There were German Luciens, then? She closed her eyes. Opened them. Lucien had stepped over his enemy's body into the full light. He went without looking at her to his motor-cycle, pulled it out of the shade of the laurels, and when she had given up hope, turned his head to look at her for a minute. She could see the two short lines at either end of his mouth. They made a single word in brackets. Straining her ears, she heard her heart beating, nothing else, not a sound. Even the old gentlemen had stopped chattering. Lucien started the engine. Now if I shout, he won't hear me. She shouted with all her force and without making a sound. Lucien. My love. My life.

"Catherine, don't stand there burning your face. Had you forgotten — it's this evening we're going to the Huets'?"

Her mother had crossed the courtyard without her guessing it. Lucien has gone and you won't dare to ask me any questions, she said to herself. She turned round, smiling.

"No," she said, "I remembered."

Chapter 45

ANDRÉE HUET chose, to wear at her reception, a dress made for her in Paris, to be worn in Paris. Ever since she married (in 1920) she had had two lives, one in her apartment in the Avenue Émile-Acollas, in which every year a room was re-decorated for her by the most fashionable painter — the year of the Russian Ballet by Alexander Benois, the year of sur-

realism by Dali, the year of the Spanish war by Picasso — each painter joyfully or piously obliterating his predecessor : and a second life in Seully. Here she settled back onto her roots, took on the defensive colouring of the province, wore clothes copied from portraits of her seventeenth-century ancestors, bored herself, and drew on a source of life rapidly drying up — she had no children and no sister or brother — but still joined in some way to who knows what Angevin root of France.

Without knowing it yet, she had decided to break with the province. She was going to throw in her lot with Paris, with the future governors of Paris, whether they were French or German, or Frenchmen speaking German and modelling their thoughts on German lasts. In a few months' time her childhood in a province would cease speaking to her. All she was turning her back on would reject her. All that had bored and fed her would die. All that had caressed as a nurse caresses a child, with roughness, with animal love, would wither in her. So, without feeling it yet, she intended. So she thought. She had forgotten that she must sleep. She had forgotten that she must dream — and what dreams : of the child whose mother, displeased, turns her back. She had forgotten that she would be away from home when she died.

The dress from the Place Vendôme made her look like any hostess in any cosmopolitan society, brittle and without savour. It cost a small fortune. Andrée was mean about money — except the money, including that paid to "agents", spent on her husband's career, and except the money she spent on clothing herself, this included Dufy's panels of Monte Carlo in the dining-room in Paris. She could put on one of her provincial dresses in a few minutes and with it the good sense, the wit, the flat bony elegance she was given at birth. It took her maid an hour and a half to turn out a Place Vendôme nobody. Her dress could have stood alone at the head of the staircase where her ancestors received Charles V, and all her guests would have known what to admire.

A few minutes before eight o'clock — in Seully a reception had to begin at an hour when in the Avenue Émile-Acollas she would still be dressing for dinner, or half the guests would fall asleep — she heard the first car rasping he gravel of the drive. It sounded of nothing but the

provinces. In Paris her guests appeared in the doorway of the room as though the footmen had shaken them out of a sleeve. Vexed, she left her room and looked between the double columns supporting the ceiling of the great staircase. The thought came to her — before she could laugh at it, it had nipped her — that Saint-Journ might be coming before time. It was Mme de Freppel and her daughter. Smiling with fury, she said,

“Charming of you to come before I expected you.”

Catherine, not her mother, showed anger at this rudeness. She blushed and her eyebrows drew together in a line sending out two glances of hate at the older woman. What a little shrew, Mme Huet thought. She felt old. Catherine’s face, without line or roughness, wearied her. She turned to Mme de Freppel with relief: nothing here to depress her, except a vitality she could write off as vulgar.

Catherine listened when her mother explained that a certain M. Sadinsky, a new-comer to Seuilly, wanted to give a large sum of money — possibly as much as ten thousand francs — to Mme Huet’s War Comforts Fund.

“Why not?” Mme Huet said coolly. “Let him offer it. We shan’t refuse.”

Mme de Freppel was not satisfied. Catherine saw her stifling her resentment of the other woman’s tone. Snub her, she cried, be rude to her: who is this Monsieur Sadinsky? why are you humbling yourself for his sake? She stared, trying to lose her humiliation in it, at an enormous Puvis de Chavennes, doves, mosaics, figures in togas gesticulating under the arches of a courtyard. . . . Where has Lucien got to? If I walk round those doves — as large as geese — they’ll snap the palms. . . . Monsieur Sadinsky, her mother was saying — and what a generous charming man! — had thought of founding a Joan of Arc League for young women. And what, Mme Huet demanded rudely, had it to do with her, this no doubt very patriotic — as his name implied — scheme?

“Your patronage——” Mme de Freppel began.

“Absurd.”

Catherine almost cried with rage. Her mother was smiling. Lifting her hands in that gesture which meant indifference, which meant “I know too much”, she said carelessly,

“As you like. But Monsieur Sadinsky has a great many

political friends, he's going to Paris, he's rich or at least knows where to put his hand on money, no doubt you could have used him. But to do that you would have to see him."

Other guests were arriving. "I'll see," Mme Huet said abruptly.

She turned her back on Mme de Freppel: who moved off, with her light step, smiling as if she had not just been insulted. Catherine followed her closely. She was suffering as a child who sees his mother laughed at can suffer. She pulled Mme de Freppel's dress.

"Let's go home."

Her mother looked at her in astonishment. "Go home now? Silly girl. You must meet people."

"I hate them," Catherine muttered. "I'm bored."

"How difficult you are!"

Smiling, Mme de Freppel allowed herself to be drawn aside by Abbé Garnier, who had just come. He had looked round the room, and seeing no one of greater importance, had hurried to her. He believed she was influential. If it was the divine will to lift him into the about-to-be-empty throne at Euxerre, he must also be meant to overlook her immoral life and make all the use of her possible. Besides, it gave him pleasure to be seen talking confidentially to Mme Prefect. He noticed neither her impatience nor the brevity of her replies. When in a minute or two she walked abruptly away from him, he carried over his unfinished sentence to the nearest listener, a half-deaf Senator, who accepted with a blank face the moral of a story he had not heard, and answered with a remark about truffles.

"I'm told that all our truffles are to be sent to America to pay for aeroplanes. Tell me it's not true!"

"But I don't know," Abbé Garnier said. He was annoyed by this irrelevance to his future.

"To — pay — for — aeroplanes! In what war have aeroplanes been decisive? You can't tell me. But our pâtés! It's unbelievable."

"You needn't believe anything which revolts your conscience," Abbé Garnier said absently. His glance passed over the room, missing low-placed objects with the regularity of a searchlight trained to pick up only the tops of hills. It rested on Mme Huet, just coming back into the room. Calling an absorbed look into his eyes, to avoid being spoken to, he slipped his lean body between the dumb

eyeless bodies separating him from his victim.

Mme Huet spoke to him with kindness. She did not like him, but by birth and principles she approved of the Church. Or any but its parish priests. Towards a priest working in a parish she felt a coldness she did not recognise as mistrust and guilt: he might hold dangerous views, or he might, looking at her, see the schoolgirl who used to give her arm a deep prick when she had a sinful thought. Odious little saint! She could speak to Garnier comfortably: he would never distress her, never, she thought, betray our class. Knowing him to be the son of a small Morvan farmer, she did not speak of his class.

"Ah, my dear Madame Huet, you must let me a-ah congratulate you on keeping our courage up by your charming hospitality. It's admirable of you!"

"We need courage," Mme Huet said.

"I agree, I agree profoundly. . . ."

Smiling and eager, he began one of his interminable speeches, larded — he was his mother's son: Mme Garnier, a native of Bourg-en-Bresse, was noted for the richness of her food — with names of the important people he knew: he never said that he had walked along a street, he said, "As I was walking along such and such a street with Monsieur de Thiviers," or "As the President said to me when we were walking . . ." or with an easy simplicity, "As I told the President . . ." Mme Huet cut him short brutally. She drew him into a room at the side, empty except for an old lady peacefully asleep; her head rested on the stone gryphons of the chimney-piece, but she was smiling, as though they were part of her innocent dreams.

"I must tell you, Monsieur l'Abbé. You have, I know, influence in ecclesiastical circles. No, no, don't fall back on your modesty. . . . I want to warn you. This is between us?"

"Of course," Garnier murmured. He stretched a sober face over his joy. The story was already crystallising in his mind. As Madame Huet said to me . . .

"We have lost the war! My husband knows it on the highest authority. It's a question of time. But time is all-important. Are we going to let this folly go on, devouring money? — I could weep when I think of our money pouring out, every minute, into the pockets of Americans of all people. They have everything already and they're all, I'm

told, atheists and savages, and it's our money. Or are we going to negotiate? You're not going to tell me, Monsieur l'Abbé, that it would be wrong to make peace, when it lies, you can trust Monsieur Huet, between peace and a second Commune. Better Hitler than that! If only my husband were in office. Less than a week before this fatal war, a high German official — you can guess his name! — told me that Monsieur Huet could do everything for peace. And he could! Forgive his wife for saying so. But if he were appreciated here as he is in Germany — I have it from Monsieur de Ribbentrop's lips, you've met him, of course? he adores my husband — that Germany didn't want to fight us, it was he told us that the Führer admires France, and my husband replied in a long letter to the Führer, telling him frankly that our country had neither the desire nor the means to injure his. What an unutterable blunder certain persons made in distrusting the Führer! What a responsibility rests on certain, I won't name them, heads! Not, thank God, on mine or Monsieur Huet's. Our hands are clean."

For the first time during one of the confidential talks he fed on — in his village, he would have become a famous gossip — Garnier felt uneasy. No peasant disapproved more angrily of communism. But something which had been born in him in a shady village in the Morvan revolted against her praise of Hitler. It was — he sought for an exact word — it was servile. One can be servile from policy — yes, but not with this religious ardour. It was perhaps heresy. It was very unseemly.

His discomfort grew. To his great relief she left him suddenly. She paused just long enough to say rapidly,

"I saw you talking to Madame de Freppel. Be careful, she's an unbalanced woman. She will get into trouble."

Stupefied, Garnier had not answered. He watched her brush aside her guests; after a moment he followed her into the other room, and saw her take Saint-Jouin by the arm. She led him to the end of the room.

Mme Huet was in so nervous a state that she broke all her own rules. She reproached Saint-Jouin. He had not been near her for a week, three times he had said he was coming but never came — what in heaven's name was wrong?

"Nothing," Saint-Jouin answered. He glanced at her

and said cruelly, "Don't scold."

"I?" Her pain made her smile. "I never scold."

"That's all right, then. My dear Andrée, I've been on duty. And I've had a severe disappointment."

"Oh, what?" Her sleepless nights had rolled themselves into a hard ball at the base of her throat. It dissolved, she trembled with relief and joy. "Tell me."

Saint-Jouin yawned and began to tell her that his concert, his wonderful concert of Parisian actresses, had been cancelled. Because of the situation. "Don't try to console me," he cried, "I'm inconsolable. After all my hard work — the delicious Madeleine was coming, my sister got her for me, I'd chosen her room at the Hôtel Buran and ordered supper — it's frightful. . . ."

Properly awake now, he chattered on. Mme Huet listened with an unfamiliar grief. At first it had nothing to do with her. It was an impersonal grief. He is worthless, she thought. Frivolous, a spendthrift, living for pleasure. With the cruelty of a stroke, she was felled by the certainty that she would not recover from her love for him. He was not her first lover. The others had fed her vanity or her ambitions, and — she would not have admitted it — her sensuality, but had not touched her heart. Suddenly the shell had split, and the minuscule kernel was suffering. And for what? He would not even feel sorry for me, she thought.

This thought saved her. She began to pity herself and her grief became that much less deep. She would never drown in it. She caught sight of herself in a mirror, haggard, a self-pitying smile nailed on her face. How I suffer, she thought, startled.

"So you see I couldn't find the time to come," Saint-Jouin smiled.

"I understand." She smiled ironically. "But don't apologise, my dear boy. In a day or two I shall be in Paris. and not in need of distraction. The provinces always bore me."

The young man blushed. She left him before he had recovered his impudence. Noticing an inquisitive look on her sister-in-law's face, she punished her by landing on her the Abbé Garnier, spluttering with affability.

"Monsieur l'Abbé, you must talk to my sister-in-law. Her home, I daresay you remember, is in Paris, but she feels

that Seuilly is much safer. Léa, my dear, you still look very yellow and haggard."

Mme de Chavigny was good-natured, she allowed Garnier to bore her with his anecdotes without relaxing her bright smile. Garnier admired in her her wealth, her husband's name, and, strangely enough, her race. Since she came to Seuilly she had given two thousand francs to the restoration fund of the Minster, and so much practical devotion in a Jewess touched him. He felt drawn to her by a bond which had something to do with her large hands and thick strong ankles. His voice lapsed into the drawling idiom of his boyhood. At the climax of his story — "... as I informed His Eminence . . ." he was harshly interrupted.

"What, you here?"

Garnier frowned. He mistrusted Labenne. The Mayor never missed a chance to let it be known that he was an atheist. With him it was a brutal article of faith. For some reason he pursued Garnier with a mockery the poor Abbé found very painful: he disliked figuring in unofficial speeches as "our Morvan saint". When Mme Labenne asked if she would be allowed to do penance for her husband, Garnier soothed her, but he was not appeased. His resentment was the warmer because, in spite of himself, he feared Labenne. He still sometimes dreamed about a savage bull which had chased him when he was a boy; sometimes it had his father's hands and sometimes the gross body and wide sallow face of Labenne. To look into the Mayor's red-veined eyes gave him a feeling of dissolution and terror.

"Good-evening, Mr. Mayor," he said frigidly.

Labenne looked down at him with a malicious smile.

"Ought you to be here? With the war going as badly as it is, you should be on your knees. To think that I should have to remind you!"

He walked off. Trembling with indignation and a shameful fear, Garnier felt his arm seized by Léa de Chavigny. She was pale. Her body shook so much that her pearls quivered.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true, Baroness?" Garnier asked gently.

"Have we lost the war? Are the Germans coming here at once?"

Before Garnier could reply, a hand was laid on Mme de

Chavigny's bare shoulder. In his drawling voice Ernest Huet said,

"My very dear Bobo, don't distress yourself. The Germans are not coming. Properly handled — if, yes, if our government of war-makers can handle anything properly, if it decides to make peace in time — they never will come. Or if they do it will be as friends. I might almost say, allies. To help us to put our house in order." He looked at Garnier with condescension. "I'm sure Abbé Garnier agrees with me."

Garnier felt himself start. It was so seldom that anything Huet said reached farther than his ears; the deputy's tortuous egoism followed a path giving little foothold to Garnier's small social vanities. He had learned to hold his tongue in Huet's presence — a village brook cannot easily force its way across a torrent. Suddenly, an icy jet sprang in him, with the discomfort he had felt when Mme Huet was talking about Hitler. He could taste it on his lips. It tasted of tarragon, which his mother was very fond of; she put it in all her soups.

"I don't——" he began.

Léa de Chavigny interrupted him. Eyes widely open, lips parted to show her superb teeth, she had fallen into an ecstasy. She spoke softly.

"You know I went to Nuremberg. I was crazy about going, I simply besieged the Foreign Office until they got me an invitation. And you know, when *he* spoke I went quite mad. What a voice! What power! My dear Ernest, he's just a lovely boy, a genius. Long before he finished I was crying with excitement. It was how I felt at the first Russian ballets. But Diaghilev was a babe, a mere babe, beside him."

Huet smiled. "My dear Bobo——" he began affectionately.

Abbé Garnier stood up.

"Allow me to say that I disagree," he said quietly. "It's true that our house needs to be put in order. But not by pagans. . . . Please excuse me, Baroness. I wish you good-night."

He felt terribly distressed. How had it happened that in one minute he had offended Mme de Chavigny and the deputy? Before his eyes danced the shabby parish church in his own village, dragging with it the dusty road and the

elms, the Café du Commerce, the school, and dragging the old parish priest, a proper figure of fun watering his herbs and his cassock with the same *maladroit* gesture. They shan't change it, he said to himself. A sharp pain seized him. What did I say to them ? he asked himself wretchedly.

Mme Huet was between him and the staircase. He stammered his goodbye. She did not answer ; he slipped away, crushed for the time being.

She had not even seen him except as a pencil-mark on one of the pillars supporting the ceiling. She was leaning on this pillar. Deafening her, the voices of her guests tore strips of calico, blew out and sucked back the walls. She could see Saint-Jouin at the other side of the room with Mme de Freppel. She had said something to make him laugh. He was all energy and virile charm. With despair Mme Huet saw this image of him join all the others she would see when she was alone. So long as he was in the room she could endure her unhappiness. As soon as he went, the pains of jealousy would begin ; one Saint-Jouin after another would deceive her, until her racked body broke down in tears. But only when she was alone. Before her husband, her pride would keep her quiet. And her real affection, and need of him.

She watched Mme de Freppel move away, leaving her daughter to talk to the young officer. So that's it ! she thought with bitterness. It was more than she could bear, Throwing away her dignity, she started to cross the room, and at this moment General Piriac came in.

She could do nothing. She was forced to sit talking to the old general, with an anguish that had never been brought as close to him : he had a special sense for warding off the anguish of others. A few yards away her husband was talking to Labenne. She tried to beckon him. If he would take Piriac off her hands for a minute ! . . .

Labenne had silenced the deputy, and by the simplest means. Each time Huet opened his mouth to speak, Labenne, his hand on Huet's lapel, twisted it viciously. Huet saw his dress jacket being ruined, and since an expense his wife objected to loudly was the expense of clothing him he had learned to care for his clothes — all the care in the world could not prevent his jacket being frosted thickly with scurf a minute after he put it on. He was trying to wriggle loose from his tormentor. Labenne held on.

He was boasting about his château at Thouédun. Rolling his lips, he dropped that he was spending a million francs only to put it in order. The finishing touches would come later, after the war. Huet was impressed; his eyelids fluttered like dirty rags as he tried to comment. For the first time, Labenne thought, delighted, he realises that I'm a very warm man. When I'm ready to take a hand in their politics in Paris, he'll lick my road for me. . . . His throat hardened. . . . And then, my friend, and then — I shan't need you after the first week. Nor your constipated wife. I'll swear she is.

"Why don't you buy land?" he said. "Your money — beg pardon, your wife's money — could melt overnight. It's a risk!"

Huet seized a chance to injure the absent Bergeot. It was a quite needless stroke of mischief, but he could not resist it. He had only to see the tail of an intrigue, and his clouded eyes, of which one always had an air of being out of focus, fastened on it so narrowly that quite often he ran into the hole he had scooped for another.

"Well, well," he drawled, "our dear Prefect was right. You're a peasant, Georges. A greedy peasant."

"Is that what he says?"

"Hardly," Huet said, smiling. "His exact phrase is: An unscrupulous grasping peasant. And he doesn't trust you an inch. He even finds you gross."

He was gratified by the anger in Labenne's eyes. I've ruined Bergeot with him for good, he thought. . . . In a year of Sundays it would not occur to him that every time Labenne remembered the phrase he would only see Huet's face and pleased smile. At this moment, Mme Huet made one of her desperate signals for help. Labenne saw it and growled,

"Your wife is making heavy weather of old Piriac."

"Ah! Is she? Well, come with me, my dear chap."

Amiability itself, since he had just, he thought, pulled off a triumph of diplomacy, he drew Labenne across the room. The only way he could bring himself to cross a room openly was in convoy, and he kept his long nose turned to his exposed side.

The moment they reached Piriac and Mme Huet, she started up. Her air of distraction made Labenne inquisitive, and he kept her talking. She let her glance go to Saint-

Jouin and the young girl. Labenne guessed the truth. It amused him to keep her. To be just, he did not grasp that she was tormented: the only human beings who could make him suffer were his children, and he was as far from expecting that as he was from understanding any feebler grief. It amused him, with his back to the young officer, to follow the scene in its reflection on Mme Huet's face. Suddenly this became bland and insolent. Without turning his head, he knew that Saint-Jouin was no longer chattering to a young woman. And now Mme Huet had the energy to flatter him. We need, she said, looking into his face, a strong character, a Hitler, a Mussolini, to keep order in the Department. Who? . . . "I can see no one for it but you, Monsieur Labenne. As Daudet used to say——"

"Don't begin quoting," Labenne said curtly. "I never read."

A feeling of contempt seized him and spread instantly to the company. To the retired civil servants, weary to death and standing up to avoid the strain on their last set of official clothes, to the dignified M. de Thiviers, that column of saintliness and negation, to the provincial matrons, their bosoms filled with pointed nails, to the young green girls, to General Piriac, block of death kept barely alive by one vein tough enough to outlast the withering of all the others. There was nothing pleasurable about his feeling. It turned everything round him to a desert, drying the roots of his tongue, even his eyeballs. He did not dare think of his children. If the acid were to touch Cécile, if suddenly he saw Henry as a pinch of dust, a bone turned over by some peasant. . . . With an effort he dodged the obsession. It withdrew to a fold of his mind where it was out of reach. He looked defiantly round the room, at the ceiling alive with flying angels and the superb frescoes separated by nymphs and plump goddesses. What junk! he said to himself; Thouédun is far better. Jostling bare arms and trampling deliberately on thin slippers, he shouldered his way to the door.

He had expected to see Derval. To save time, he had arranged to talk to him here. He was furious with the young man for disobeying: not until he was in bed did it strike him that it was unlike Derval to miss a party.

Catherine stepped out of his way. After she had succeeded, deftly, she thought, in shaking off Saint-Jouin, she

had been left alone. She did not notice it. She was busy moving her happiness from her shoulders to her wrists and the ends of her fingers. If only there were dancing, she thought. The warmth, the lights, the extravagant splendour of the room were making her head swim.

Behind her shoulder two people began talking.

"... four of Monsieur de Thiviers's workers, married men with families, were executed. Communists. Sabotage. . . ."

"When?"

"This morning or this evening. It will teach the others."

She turned round. Two old faces, the texture and hue of cork, without eyebrows, without malice, bobbed away from her on the current. She gripped her hands. And now wherever she looked she saw four shabby rooms, four shabby poor women, and children to whom no one had explained their father's fault yet. That was to come.

Chapter 46

BERGEOT that evening was alone in his room at the Prefecture. Towards eight o'clock, when he was writing letters, Rienne came in. He had a sheet of notepaper in his hand. In half a dozen curt sentences he had drawn up an indictment of Gabriel Derval. The editor of the *New Order* had (1) commented on the official news that the situation was clearly hopeless, (2) said that Seuilly ought to be evacuated, (3) said that defeat must be thought of as very probable, (4) said that Seuilly was in danger of being pillaged and its decent citizens murdered by socialists and other disorderly elements, (5) said that but for the war Hitler would have led Europe, including France, towards the new age.

He read it aloud. "There you are," he finished, laying it on Bergeot's desk.

"Why didn't he say 'France, including Europe'?" Bergeot said. "It would have been just as sensible." He felt a familiar irritation followed by as familiar a calm.

When Bonamy spoke in this voice, there was nothing to be done. It had been so all their lives. When they were children Bonamy let him behave with complete selfishness for weeks or months, then one day he said seriously, "I've had enough, Émile." And it was enough. . . . He pushed the paper away.

"Where did he talk all this nonsense? What's your evidence?"

"I have the evidence of a Lieutenant Aulard — Derval talked to him in the Café Buran — and of two others who overheard——"

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough? Did you know that the *New Order* is owned by Labenne now? It used to belong partly to Monsieur Thiviers and partly to the Italian Government——"

Bergeot interrupted. "Who told you all this?"

Rienne shook his head.

"It was Louis Mathieu," Bergeot said viciously. At this moment he was exasperated by the trouble these honest people were giving him. A plague on honest men; they are far worse nuisances than rogues.

"That's enough, Émile," Rienne said placidly. "Master Derval is subject to military law. A court martial. But if you choose to act, we shan't interfere with you. It's better for you to shut him up. And in fact you want to."

Bergeot burst out laughing. "I have my hands full. You and Louis don't trust me to be thorough, and you want me to commit myself. Do you think I don't see through you? Why, Bonamy, I can read you like a novel. . . . And what a novel! No love affairs, a mere thread of plot — nothing but the servitude and grandeur of a soldier's life. Much too Vigny. As for Louis — any minor prophet. . . . All right, all right. I'll have Derval locked up. You shall hear me. It's right, I suppose, it's necessary, and it's a damned bore."

He went cheerfully to the telephone. And it was true that his anger had gone off in the pleasure of letting Bonamy see that he was acute. Dear Bonamy. A soldier, nothing but a soldier. . . .

"I know you're only tying up the dog," Rienne said. "His master is still running about."

"Oh, if you want me to have Labenne arrested——" Bergeot smiled.

Rienne did not smile. "You won't need me to tell you when to arrest him," he said. . . .

Little more than an hour later Bergeot answered his own telephone and was surprised to hear Marguerite's voice.

"But where are you? I thought you were with the Huets?"

"I went there. Catherine felt faint and I brought her home and put her to bed. It's nothing. Nowadays young women imagine they have nerves." Bergeot could see the gesture she made, of amused contempt. "I hope you can come home — and stay."

He called Lucien, told him — for the pleasure of seeing his face — about Derval, and went off. During the drive he tried to think about the effects of the arrest. His mind betrayed him with odds and ends of dreams, he seemed to be hanging head-down in memory. It was a clear night, with wisps of the day's clouds lying about. They waste time up there, too, he thought. He felt irritably that he ought to be at work. His eyes pricked.

He let Marguerite wait on him; she brought a tray of bread, pâté, cherries, and a bottle of thin Vouvray. He began to feel ashamed of his impatience. When she chose, she could soothe him by moving quietly about the room, taking a slipper off and setting it by its fellow, folding garments with the neatness of a convent. All her gestures spelled rest and approval. And how he needed to be approved!

"You're not thinking of going back tonight?"

"No," he said. "No, I'll stay here."

"Good." She came to him. "Let me look at you. Yes, a new line here — and here. Oh, this war."

"It's not the war. I'm forty-eight."

"I'm forty," she laughed. "But I don't make it an excuse for killing myself. I have another forty years to live. At least. Do you imagine I want to be tired all that time? You could rest a little."

"I'm resting."

She kissed him lightly. "As soon as the war ends we'll go away, we'll go to Royan or Cap Ferrat. We'll lie in the sun." She drew back, smiling. "Why shouldn't we have a child? I'm not too old yet."

Bergeot did not know whether what he felt was grief. If, he thought, you were my wife. . . . But all these years he had been under the illusion that what he had with her was a

marriage. Suddenly it was not marriage, it was a relation. With a mistress you have relations ; with a wife — children, certainty, boredom, happiness. One marriage in the family is enough to point out the differences, and in the Bergeot family not less than a hundred and three marriages of Bergeot sons and daughters had been noted at the parish church of Thouédun and the shabby mairie — beginning, in 1799, with Gaston Bergeot, peasant. . . .

Marguerite had moved to the other side of the room — just when he felt this intolerable need to touch her. Getting up, he put his arms round her. She smiled at him.

“ And if we can't marry ? ”

“ Does it matter ? ” she said in a light voice.

“ But the boy — ”

“ Will be ours,” she said in the same voice. “ He will be like you, brave, a great talker, with a touch, oh, only a touch, of genius. And your hands.” She touched them.

“ And you wouldn't mind ? ” Bergeot groaned.

She put her head back to look at him. Her body, smooth as it was, sprang out of his grasp. She was still smiling.

“ You don't know me. My dear husband, I shan't mind growing ugly for our son — I see you've decided to have a son. I mind nothing — for him, for you, for myself — except poverty. I can't be poor. I've seen poverty too close, it's not even hideous, it's squalid. Too many bodies crowded together in small rooms, an endless labour of keeping clean — and you can't, you know. And all the — oh, what can I call it ? — all the mucus of life swamping us. Our son — why not our sons ? — must be safe from that. And from war. You won't ask me to have him in an air-raid shelter or a ditch ? Oh, my love, let us have peace and a son.”

Bergeot held her by the waist so that she should not jerk out of his hands. He could not see further in her eyes than you can see at night in a rut full of water, the reflection of blackness in blackness, a thin single gleam. Do I know you ? he thought, with pain. I know a great many things about your body, little enough about your soul, if you have one. He was holding her closely and awkwardly. His body felt broken.

“ I can't stop the war.”

“ Of course you can't,” she said, mocking him. “ But you needn't help to prolong it.”

She held back a sentence beginning : Thiviers says. . . .

"What idiots men are," she said softly. "Women alone would never risk the deaths of their sons and husbands. It is bad enough that there are hundreds of streets my son will walk in and I shan't see him there, I shan't know what rooms he's entering, what bodies he is touching: long after I am dead he'll go here and there, stretch his arms out, look at other women, look at the sky, and I, I shall know nothing."

She had been using the tone which made him think of an animal lying in the sun; he heard her without at the moment taking very much notice of what she said. He made her lie down.

"If the war lasts for years and years I shall be too old to have children," she said.

"Be quiet," he said to her.

"But you would like it?"

"Please be quiet."

She sighed once and was quiet.

The policemen who arrested Derval must have had orders to treat him politely. They allowed him to be alone in his bedroom while he packed a bag, and when he threatened them with "friends of mine who'll deal with this outrage", they shrugged their shoulders in a way which was almost an apology. "I suppose you'll allow me to telephone," he said.

"Certainly."

They waited without impatience while he rang up Labenne.

"... he's gone already? . . . Yes, I know where he is, I arranged to see him there. I'll ring him again in the morning." He put the receiver down, turning to them with a smile in which they read that he was not completely sure that Labenne was prepared to help him. Neither were they. But it is easier to avoid a mistake of this sort than to put it right later.

"I'm ready," he said curtly.

One policeman opened the door, the other picked up Derval's bag. Other doors opened on the landings and faces appeared in the cracks with the speed of insects. His landlady, who had been standing at the foot of the stairs to remind him that he owed for a month, was overcome by the ceremony of this arrest, and prudently, timidly, held her tongue.

Chapter 47

RIENNE was watching Piriac and Woerth, trying to guess where each would show himself. Woerth had read the intelligence report aloud, he had been going to comment on it, but Piriac had silenced him with a gesture — surprisingly vigorous. He's really thinking, Rienne said to himself. A shadow crossed the old general's eyes — a second, a third — like the shadows thrown upward by fish moving along the bed of a river. The disturbance reached his hands, they twitched.

"Close the shutters," he said suddenly.

Rienne closed them against the single ray of fierce June sun which could reach this room.

After a minute Piriac said, "We must be ready."

General Woerth lifted his yellow face with a movement of curiosity so unguarded that for a second he really did show himself. His ambition is tormenting him, Rienne thought; he has to guess whether Piriac, in preparing to defend Seully, is taking the right, that is, the politic line.

"So," Woerth said, "you think that G.H.Q.——"

Piriac interrupted him with a brutality he rarely showed to officers who were almost his equals. "You can trust me to interpret the wishes of the General Staff."

Another silence. Stooping a little in his chair, head resting on his hand, Ligny was either asleep or too far gone in his thoughts to notice that Woerth had been snubbed. Or perhaps he refused to draw any advantage in his battle with Woerth from Piriac's blow at his chief of staff — unjust at that. . . . The light in the room began to quiver rapidly; clinging to the wall facing the shutters, it folded and unfolded and refolded wings. A light wind — the first for weeks — had sprung up and was stepping from branch to branch of a tree in the courtyard. Piriac smiled absently. A film cleared from his eyes, the lids flickered.

"The weather is going to break," he said.

"When, sir?" Rienne asked.

"In about ten days."

"Too late to do us any good," Woerth said coldly.

The impulse Piriac had felt momentarily, to put Woerth in

his place, had gone. He was comfortable, as always when one of his Girondin memories was in charge.

"What do you think?" he said in a simple voice, "how long shall we hold the Somme? A week? Two weeks?"

Woerth did not speak at once. He is considering, Rienne thought, whether to say what he believes: Piriac may repeat it. What he says must show him off as a clever general not too clever for his boots.

"I think that the Germans will get through when and where they like," Woerth said, with an air of ease and lightness.

Pointing at the wall calendar, Piriac lunged forward as though he wanted to stab the day to the heart.

"June the 1st," he said. "It's been a good spring. Rather hot, we may have too much rain when the vines are flowering — which is bad. As for the war, we have plenty of time. It's clear that the Germans are going to invade England. They may have luck. In the meantime we shall make ourselves safe on the Marne. . . . It's always the same war. . . ."

With a start — the word Marne had caught up with him in some place where the rivers were long shadows — Ligny sat up. He yawned with his mouth shut, it was a trick he had tried to teach Rienne — "against the day when I begin to bore you indecently."

"If only that were true!" he said. "But in fact war has been spoiled, ruined. No one cares any longer about saddles, only for petrol and trigonometry. It's not combat, it's purely and disgracefully slaughter. I have very unhappy dreams. Why should I dream I'm a young man, when even in the dream itself all the others are dead?"

Piriac laughed. Rienne was so startled that he almost showed it — an inexcusable sin. During all his years in Seuilly he had never heard such sounds from Piriac: it was the strangest, the harshest, and at the same time the most piteous of laughs. The old general had been dead for so long that to see him move as if he were living — to hear his life give one of its least equivocal cries — was quite shocking. And his eyes sparkled.

"I remember my first sight of war," he said. "Oh, a mere sight, a touch. No more. It was early morning, cool; the first hour when you know for certain whether the clouds are only left over from the night, or mean rain: you know,

there's a moment when you can make a mistake and a moment later when it speaks for itself ; or you see an owl going off one way and a hawk starting out in another — but I've forgotten what birds flew in that place, I only remember frogs at night, battalions of frogs, I give you my word — it was coolness turning round all four quarters like a young dog, there was hyssop growing out of a wall, if you licked your fingers you could taste the light. I don't know whether they have such mornings anywhere now. I doubt it. . . . My mare Bella picked her way behind the others, she was trying to see herself in the stream. Like this." With infinite care he turned his head sideways, balancing himself by grasping a heavy paper-weight. "I was counting the date-palms . . . one . . . two . . . bullets spurted from behind the cliff. Estaunie threw his arms up and slipped over his beast's neck just as I pulled Bella to one side. . . . Clean to the heart. . . ."

He stopped. His words had been coming more and more slowly, until each was a distinct memory, separated from the rest by an abyss of joy. He could not go on. He had no longer the energy for such a road.

"My God. We were young," Woerth said. He smiled without irony. "My keenest ambition was a third pair of boots — made for me. I was pleased with myself in those days."

"In those days," Ligny said, "the country was young." He hesitated and said, "The Republic was still very young. Now . . ." he smiled, but it was from this end of his life, not, like Piriac, from its beginning : "— no, no, we ought not to have started this war. We are too human, the surface of our old houses is too smooth, too new, we've loaded ourselves with too many perfect things, Chambord, Chartres, Nîmes ; our hands are too full of a past we've brought safely this far, our minds are too orderly, our bread is too sound — for war. Whether we win or lose we shall be defeated. . . . But since we are in fact in a war — we ought to fight it out " — his smile became mocking — "to the last row of numerals. Poor little numbers — they'll die like young men. Exactly like young men."

"If Seuilly is destroyed—" Piriac stammered.

Rienne saw that any pity the old general was able to feel had taken refuge in this single narrow space. In the tiny image of Seuilly in his mind, its barracks, its double bridge

over the Loire, its flowering chestnuts, the spire of its abbey.

Ligny shrugged his shoulders. "It could be rebuilt. What I mind most are the villages no one knows — except their few families. All those roofs, not one like its neighbours. When I think of the Prussians coming into France," he said quietly, "settling here for years, with their cruelties, I could weep over our little flock of villages."

"France," Woerth said, "would still be France — even" — he smiled ironically — "I state the extreme case, even in temporary submission — temporary and in a sense voluntary — to Monsieur Hitler. . . ."

Ligny said bitterly and softly,

"Have you — but of course you have — a respectable new word meaning temporary betrayal? Voluntary treachery, perhaps? Why not simply treachery?"

Without turning his head, Rienne looked at Woerth. The skin, yellow as a drum, was stretched so tightly across his temples that Rienne could watch the veins; he saw Woerth's pulse quicken. His arm lying on the table trembled slightly. When he began speaking, his voice, quick at first, became slow and cold. Ligny had succeeded in rousing an emotion older and deeper than his political craft, old in him as that was.

"You are a sceptic, my friend" — no doubt he had a respectable new word which meant indifferently friendship or contempt — "you have no faith worth calling a faith. You won't understand me even if I tell you that I feel certain God created France for a purpose. Other nations, other purposes. Only the French can carry out theirs. We French are not crass or stupid like the Germans and the English. We deserve something better than the Republic and its coarse pride. If defeat — yes, if Hitler is His rod for breaking the Republic, let us be broken. For a time, for as long as necessary. It will be worth the cost. . . . Even in defeat we shall be nobler than the rest of the world, because we know why we've been defeated; other peoples don't know. But I tell you, I know France will survive. Why? Because Christianity must survive. . . . And conquer! I look on the revival, even the military revival of France, as certain." He smiled, startling Rienne, who would have been less startled if the shutters had dropped from the window. "That ought to satisfy you," he added drily. "It's logical enough."

"Mathematical," Ligny said. "Defeat equals Christianity, Christianity equals victory. Therefore defeat equals victory. How you remember your training!"

Woerth was stung. He began an insulting retort, to which Ligny listened, smiling.

Rienne did not listen. Shutting out Woerth's voice he thought about Thouédun. If it were occupied by the Germans, and some men, the least pliant — as Woerth would say, the proudest — were put up against the walls of their houses, would grief send the others into the church they only entered now for a christening or a marriage? Would the blood running across the wall mean forgiveness? Would the despair of obscure men become a word meaning silence? Meaning an end of memory? Meaning peace? . . . He came out of a shadowy trench to hear Piriac talking quietly and heavily. He must have been talking for some moments.

". . . roads in a state of defence, the bridge mined. Reinforced concrete posts on both banks . . ."

He hesitated. A bewildered look, as though he were puzzled by himself, crossed his face. Woerth was listening with a half-hidden satisfaction. He means to let the old man get himself into trouble, Rienne thought. He looked quickly at Ligny. Has he seen it?

"You can't be sure your sums will always come out right," Ligny said. He smiled at Woerth.

Woerth ignored him. He said gently to Piriac,

"The concrete posts may not be practicable. I doubt if there is the material."

"May I speak, sir?" Rienne asked.

Piriac moved his head.

"The material exists. You have only to requisition it. It was brought into the town for civilian purposes."

"Where?"

"To replace an old house — which needn't be pulled down. I have the information——"

"You would like me to look into it?" Woerth asked Piriac.

"Yes, yes."

"I'll send for you," Woerth said to Rienne.

Ligny's face became mischievous. Smiling at Rienne, he said, "Your friend the Prefect wants us to arm the butchers and grocers of Seuilly. He wants to turn his volunteers into a civil guard. What's your opinion?"

"I have the poorest opinion of armed grocers, sir. An armed Frenchman is quite another affair. This is quite another war — not a trench war. It would be worth while to employ civilians in defending their own towns and villages — not simply to fight for their houses — to delay the Germans. They could deal with advance-guards — villages have been taken by a single German motor-cyclist. It's disgraceful. . . ."

Woerth interrupted without looking at him : he looked at Ligny instead, with open dislike.

"Need we waste time on the opinions of your subordinate officer ? I have my own opinion about armed mobs. I don't press it on you. Possibly I may have to later. You spoke of fighting to the last soldier. Charming — romantic. The spirit of the Grand Army, and so on. And after that ? After our last army collapses ? Who will keep order in the country ? Colonel Rienne's grocers ?"

The movement of Piriac's hand — flesh striking wood with a dead sound — silenced him.

"That's enough," Piriac said. He looked at Rienne. "I shall be sending you with orders. Go outside. Wait."

Rienne walked to the end of the corridor. A window with bars looked on to a courtyard where someone he could not see was walking. A confused noise, almost the sound of foils. He recognised it and smiled. A soldier was raking the gravel and the withered flowers of the chestnuts. In the same moment he recognised his sadness as the thought that he was no longer a fighting soldier, he had become an official, an office soldier, a civilian in uniform. He worked with old men ; and intrigues caught on him like spiders' webs between trees. . . . He remembered suddenly an early morning in September 1914 when — he was walking through a copse to battalion headquarters — he felt in the coolness the threads breaking across his face : he remembered that month and the unlooked-for joy.

He waited. An hour. Two. Three. . . .

When he left the barracks the most savage heat of the day seized him, drying the breath in his mouth. Ollivier opened a bottle of yellow Vouvray for him, and while he was drinking it, read through the orders.

"Your good honest Piriac, and Woerth and the rest, are not exactly thorough," he said drily. "If they want my opinion you can tell them, with respect, that barricades on

the roads and mined bridges are nothing much. Why not mine the roads, too? And why no anti-tank ditch?" He frowned. The weight of his curved forehead, too big for his body, dragged his head forward. "It's four months ago I began digging — and after one day Woerth ordered me to stop. And I wanted to put pill-boxes for my machine-guns at all the cross streets. What a — a general!"

Rienne had closed his eyes to soothe the glare under the lids. Almost without meaning to he talked to his friend about his doubts. After a moment Ollivier's silence reached him. He opened his eyes and met the other's stubborn innocent smile.

"That for the generals!" Ollivier said joyously. "Thank God we have a few rivers. It takes longer, you know, to form a line in depth. And against tanks, it must be deep. By the time the Boche reach it the Marne will be ready for them." Walking with his infantryman's short stride, he had reached the door. "And — here — we shall be ready."

Rienne felt ashamed of his doubts. They come of fighting in an office, he thought. With a few regiments of Olliviers France was perfectly safe. Why doubt it?

He went out. In the terrible heat men were dragging blocks of stone, old railway sleepers, wrecked Citroens, into position across the road coming into Seully from the north. Between here and the bridge the road was crossed by six side streets. The crews of the anti-tank guns in these streets had extended the camouflage of branches to make shelters for themselves. Squatting in one, a young soldier poured water on his neck and chest; two young women in the doorway of the nearest house were laughing at him. Seeing Rienne, they ran inside. The boy grinned timidly.

"It's hot," he murmured.

Rienne talked to the men guarding the first bridge over the Loire. They were gay. Goodness knows from where or how, a tremor of excitement had reached them. Perhaps, up there, the tide had turned, and the Loire had first news of it. Rienne crossed the bridge. Glancing down at the Loire — What do you know? he asked. The double line of sand, blond fine hair parted delicately round the island, the supple curve, as hard as supple, of the embankment, pleased him — and told him nothing. And "Nothing," was the answer he got from the closed fronts of old houses, and the trees. The sunlight, blond like the sand, infinitely brighter, made of an

infinite number of grains of light, blinded him. Through half-closed eyes he counted the splinters breaking off the surface of the river — a long, two longs, a short. . . . A new word? Meaning — what?

Chapter 48

ON his way that evening to call on Mathieu, Rienne heard behind him a familiar and unwanted voice intoning his name. Abbé Garnier's face wore its most affable smile. To look up at the tall officer, he tilted his head on one side, like a bird imitating a man.

"Ah, my dear Colonel. Why have you hidden yourself? You weren't at dear Monsieur de Thiviers's dinner-party, you weren't at the Huets'. You mustn't let yourself become anti-social."

Rienne answered that he was busy.

"Quite, quite. The war — I know. And that a-ah reminds me. Is it true that General Woerth considers we are losing the war?"

"I'm not in General Woerth's confidence," Rienne said. "It's certainly a lie."

He walked on. A moment later when he crossed the road he saw from the corner of his eye the Abbé standing in the same spot on the pavement, looking about him with the acted indifference of a peasant at market. He was looking for bargains among the passers-by. Which of them was worth accosting? . . . Rienne lengthened his stride. He was irritated because he could not speak to Garnier with civility. It humiliated him.

Mathieu was waiting for him at a table in Marie's little café. He had taken the table at the back, between the end of the counter and the inner door. From this sort of alcove he could watch the room, and speaking in a low voice he would not be overheard. He spoke of Bergeot. He knew everything about Rienne's love for his foster-brother and he did not let it soften him. If Rienne was weak in this way, so much the worse for him. Mathieu despised tenderness as a

form of weak will : he despised the Germans not so much because they were the enemy — for that he hated them — as because of their childish longing to be loved : he has spotted it in them the more easily that, since his mother died no one had shown any wish to love him.

“Émile,” he said, “is too thick with Thiviers. I’ve learned, by the way, that Monsieur de Thiviers is holding up the manufacture of bombing sights because he won’t hand over one of his patents except at a royalty which would stagger even an American——”

“That isn’t Émile’s fault,” Rienne said.

“Of course not. But why does he protect Thiviers, who is no better than a defeatist ? I tell you, Bonamy, your Émile is weak. You must know — don’t you ? — that he hasn’t put into effect his own orders — about food-hoarding and sending away children. It’s cowardice !”

“He may have his reasons,” Rienne murmured.

“Exactly !”

They were silent. What was Mathieu thinking ? He had spoken about Émile with his usual intransigence but without passion, almost as though he were filling in time. Rienne thought : He has something else to tell me. Watching Mathieu’s face, he saw it change as though an acid at work under the skin were dissolving both bone and intractable thoughts. Another moment and he would be human, ever graceful. The change stopped short of that. A new bitterness sharpened the contours again. He said, almost whispered,

“You remember my friend in Geulin ? — Uhland — Joachim von Uhland.” He laid the name down between them, slowly. Very slowly.

“Yes.”

“The order to release him was sent to the camp. Three days ago. And cancelled an hour after it arrived. After Uhland had been told — when he was packing . . .” Mathieu lifted his hand. “You can imagine he hadn’t much to pack.”

Rienne tried to avoid noticing the other’s despair. It was too naked and uncivilised.

“Who cancelled it ?”

“The police. Acting on a word from Labenne.”

“When did you hear this ?”

“An hour ago.”

"How?" Rienne asked.

Glancing at him with a slight contempt, Mathieu did not answer. Rienne felt vexed. It was like Louis to get his information from the police themselves — or probably he had found something out about one of the camp guards that he needed money badly or he was soft-hearted.

"Labenne can't overrule the Prefect," he said drily.

"Of course not."

"Well?"

"The order has been cancelled."

Another silence. Mathieu stared in front of him with an expression he had omitted — or he was much too tired — to wear. Rienne was at first startled. Then he guessed the truth. Mathieu despised mankind because he despised himself — his own weakness. How could he respect a man, a Frenchman, who had fallen in love with another and that man a Prussian? Rienne felt a deep revulsion then pity.

But why injure with pity a man who feels none at all for himself — no more than for his fellow-men? Did Louis, he wondered, pity his Boche friend? Probably not; he only loved him.

"I don't know," Mathieu said slowly, "whether Émile agreed or didn't."

"I'm certain he didn't. He can't know."

"How can you be certain?"

Rienne hesitated. "I know Émile," he said, with reluctance. "When he has arranged something he doesn't like it to fall flat."

Mathieu did not say: Yes, Émile is vain. He nodded without speaking.

"Do you want me to tell him?" Rienne said unkindly.

"If you will."

Rienne caught the undernote of mistrust. It meant: No doubt you'll let Émile talk you round. He was going to reassure Mathieu, but they were interrupted.

Marie had been standing behind the counter, elbow on the zinc, eyes seeking in every poor familiar object in the room the meaning of a life that forced her to fall asleep every night in a room blacked out by terror, and every morning wake frightened, gripping her pillow. . . . The other clients left: only Colonel Rienne and his friend were still there. Timidly, stopping at each empty table to pick up a further

reason for going on, she approached theirs. Mathieu glanced at her without interest.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

Rienne turned his head. As soon as he smiled at her, she began crying — quietly, so that he should not think she was in serious trouble. But in fact it was very serious, so serious, so hard to explain, that she had spent the night before wandering from her bedroom to the kitchen looking for help. She found a tiny field-mouse. Tormented as she was, she let it run away.

"What's the matter, Marie? Is Pierre . . . ?"

Shaking her head, she held a letter out to Rienne: it had been creased and re-creased until it was like a child's screw of paper. Rienne spread it on the table.

"I simply ask you why you wanted it. Didn't you think of me? You could have been sure I should know. In any case I should have known when I touched you. You see I remember you, what else have I in my head, all these nights after I left what else had I? When I come back tell me the truth. If you can put the reason into my head. I may put my arms round you. Or the war may end.—Pierre."

Marie was smiling. You would not have known it from looking at her.

"Is he ill?" she murmured. "Pierre."

"No," Rienne said. He could not tell her what he thought had happened. That Pierre — who had seemed to him slow-witted and good, a good soldier — had been stunned by the brute fact of the war; it had invaded his nerves; his mind, not used to interfering with his body, could not throw it out. He was carrying a monstrous nightmare about with him, and the only thought he had about his wife, all he could feel about her, was that she was not there, she had left him. Rienne hesitated. Could he say to her: Your husband is living in a hell of absence, his life now is only absence, which is worse than solitude?

"Don't be anxious," he said calmly. "When men are fighting, they can't find the words to write about it. He'll be able to talk to you when he comes. When he sees you it will be all right."

Marie took the letter back. She shook her head slightly. Because what Rienne said did not convince her she felt alarmed. And embarrassed. She was only anxious now to hide from him that he had failed her. He was always kind

and it would disappoint him. Her eyes went from Rienne to Mathieu like the eyes of a child hoping that one parent will restore the happiness the other has taken away. She shivered.

"You may be right," she said.

The door of the café opened sharply. Marie spun round. It was only a customer. An old man — one of those who filled her with impatient pity, it was so obvious that never in his life had he made anyone tremble, with love, with terror.

Chapter 49

THE next day and for three more days, the heat grew more pitiless. Unless you enjoy the sensation of a scorched throat it was impossible to breathe freely in the sun at noon. It was too hot even for sunflowers and lizards. Towards evening, the sky, colourless until now, began to reflect acidly the greens and yellows of the bruised ground. A lassitude which was not coolness came from it.

Was it believable that, up there, refugees were dying on the roads of anything worse than the heat? When bombs fell among them, the youngest, the most ignorant, did not know that they were pressing themselves against fields which have borne a heavier weight of human suffering and courage than any in the world. Dead, they knew as much as the ground itself. . . . The Germans may have had bodies as immune to heat and fatigue as their spirits were to disobedience. At dawn that day, June 5th, the cracked feverish ground hatched out thousands of tanks, tens of thousands of winged tanks. In earlier wars the enemy had paid out almost as many lives to destroy a town as its houses held memories of births, effort, patience, death; at the end some sort of equality had been established between victor and defeated. It was almost justice. Groping in the earth, the hands of the dead villager were as likely to touch an enemy hand as the hands of one of his. Nor in that place would the difference vex him. Today, high explosive and tanks have upset this delicate balance. Five seconds wipe out a

house which cost as many centuries.

In short, General Woerth's idea of war as mathematics had come up against another which reduced it to nonsense. In this new theory, defeat equalled defeat and victory victory. It gave no support, either, to Ligny's idea of war as art. The answer was grossly simple. War equalled war.

On the evening of this day Labenne invited two people, M. de Thiviers and M. Huet, to dine at a small hotel-restaurant famous for its good food — the St. Maur at Geulin.

The road from Seully to Geulin follows the Loire closely. A false breeze, made up of heat and dust, came through the windows of the car ; arched from bank to bank by the groined flight of martins, the river gave an air of coolness. Only an air. The little St. Maur, built at the edge of the Loire, was gasping for breath. There were two dining-rooms, both crammed with good citizens of Seully, immune, when it came to eating, to heat and shortness of breath. Mme Leglard, the proprietress, took Labenne and his party into her own sitting-room. As he always did, Labenne wondered if she would have looked so much like a procuress if she had been one.

"Here you are, Mr. Mayor," she smiled, "you're at home here."

Labenne tapped her arm. He took as much trouble to charm a restaurant-owner as a Minister : it was part of his recipe for success. And, of course, the only sensual pleasure he rated almost as highly as the pleasure of using power, was food and wine. . . . He took Mme Leglard aside to order the meal. Looking politely through the window onto the rough lawn with the sunflowers, his guests heard her say, chuckling,

"Restrictions ! What do you think ? We take a lot of notice of them here !"

During the meal Labenne did not take any trouble to hide his excitement. He helped himself, before passing them to his guests, from each of ten dishes of hors d'œuvre. The table, a round one, was pushed against the open window. He had seated Huet so that he faced it — not that any light would penetrate below the surface of Huet's eyes : the impalpable intrigues tumbling over each other there kept it out. Set deeply in his head, his eyes reflected nothing except

his self-admiration and his suspicions. Labenne was amused by seeing him squirm sideways in his eagerness to avoid too much daylight. M. de Thiviers, on the other hand, stared at the sunflowers with a gentle smile. He withdrew it when Labenne said,

"You've heard the news, of course. The Germans are across the Somme."

He announced it as though it were a triumph. Thiviers, he noted, did not give away anything, you could not tell whether he were anxious or relieved. But Huet seized his chance to show off. He is a male *prima donna*, Labenne thought. It was obvious that he had spent the afternoon telephoning to Paris to important men; more likely to their secretaries. He could not keep it to himself. The second course, a truffled foie gras, came in; full of words, he left it untouched.

". . . I was saying to a certain personage less than an hour ago, that since we are forced to end the war, we should be infinitely wiser to end it on the Somme than on the Seine, or on the Seine than on the Loire. He quite agreed with me. You can take it, my dear Georges, that peace will be made; at long last we shall do what I've always advised — come to terms with Germany. Without boasting, I may say that my affiliations, my friends in the German Government . . ."

You have everything in your favour, Labenne thought, except yourself. If for one single week you could bring yourself to walk straight towards your object. . . . But, no, you must play the Richelieu. You a Richelieu! A bellows of vanity, egoism, wasted industry. . . .

"Eat, eat," he said.

The deputy took up his fork. "You're not in your right place in Seuilly," he said pleasantly. "As soon as my position is settled I'll do what I can. An Under-Secretaryship, eh?"

"You're too kind," Labenne said.

He had difficulty in swallowing his laughter. His certainty that Huet would be disappointed set an edge, a sharp edge, on his own joy. Yet he had never felt so nearly kind. It bothered him that Huet had not yet tasted Mme Leglard's famous *pâté*. He urged him again and again to eat, filling his glass from the second bottle of Brézé. And it was a little from this unusual kindness that he began flattering Huet. Your important friends, he told him, will

do anything for you ; you have only to ask and go on asking. . . .

Huet's vanity may have been fed, but his suspicions were, too. His drowned blue eyes became further submerged, and Labenne saw, with cynical amusement, that he had only made Huet decide to do much less for him, since clearly he needed it so badly.

And here was the Loire salmon, cooked as only Mme Leglard knew how to cook it, in freshly churned butter. There were two. It blunted the edge of Labenne's joke : " A host is either a fool or a knave, a knave if he keeps the middle for himself, a fool if he doesn't." At the same time Mme Leglard fetched in six bottles of the Quarts de Chaume : it rose suavely in the glasses, a foreigner would not suspect its strength. Labenne began to talk about Bergeot. For the first time he talked with brutal contempt. Bergeot, he said, was dangerous, a fool who could be trusted to burn Seully for the honour of France. As if honour would be saved, as if peace could honourably be thought of, only when the French had burned all their own towns and killed all their young men in a pretence at war.

Thiviers looked up. " A pretence ? "

" Of course a pretence," Labenne grinned. " How can it be anything else when one side is armed and the other naked — armed, as fools say, with their honour ? Can you tell me how many dead Frenchmen, how many towns wiped out, is enough for an honourable peace ? Perhaps we ought to sacrifice another million ? Or burn Paris ? So that other people — the Americans, perhaps — can't say we didn't try ! Eh ! "

He opened his mouth to its widest and threw in a heap of salmon. Speaking through it, he said,

" We must ruin Bergeot before he can ruin us."

" In what way ? " Huet smiled.

Labenne shrugged his shoulders. " A way can be found."

" Surely," the deputy said, " we need Monsieur Bergeot ? "

Now he wants to show us his Richelieu, Labenne thought. He was delighted. Well, let him.

" What ? "

Huet's nose quivered. " We shall want him to take responsibility for releasing Derval and Edgar Vayrac. My idea, my modest idea, was to force him to do it. I confess —

for the moment — it seems to me a little difficult. I don't know what force to use——”

“ I do,” Thiviers said.

He had cut the deputy's eloquence in mid-air, and he left him hanging between curiosity and hurt vanity until Huet was almost choked. Clearly he was not going to say anything more. His curiosity was too much for Huet, who cried,

“ My dear Thiviers, how remarkably interesting. And what do you propose to do ? ”

Thiviers hesitated. “ At the moment, nothing.”

He had not glanced at Labenne. At most, his pupils had made a scarcely perceptible shift. But Labenne made two guesses — they were of the kind on which he acted, because they came to him with that jerk of his mind he obeyed as blindly as his ancestors obeyed twitches of their peasant bones. Thiviers could ruin Bergeot. And he was not going to explain himself, now, because he distrusted — whom ? Me, Labenne thought, swelling with stifled laughter. Me !

Mme Leglard brought in a tureen of mushrooms stewed in cream. Helping himself, he pushed the tureen towards Thiviers.

“ They're not toadstools,” he said, with a clown's grin. “ You can eat them quite safely.”

Thiviers was talking about Mathieu, using words a crusader might have used about the infidel in the holy places. Under Labenne's smile, he became confused and broke down. It gave Huet his chance to boast that next time he went to Paris he would see to suppressing the *Journal*. Weaving with both his long hands,

“ I shall speak to the Minister. I flatter myself that I have an influence. . . . Our poor Prefect is, if I may coin a phrase, the tool of war-mongering Jews, Mathieus who have done well for themselves.” Lowering his voice, he added zealously, “ He's no friend of yours, my dear Thiviers. He has been urging the Government to take over your factory, he says you're incompetent.”

Labenne felt certain this was a lie. It sprang from nothing but Huet's sensual pleasure in treachery. Glancing at Thiviers, he saw from his resigned smile that he was rapidly covering this new irritant with a layer of bruised self-pity. At this moment Mme Leglard came in with the dish of young chickens fried in butter, and flavoured — it

was the sole fault of her Angevin cooking that she did not know when enough was enough — with herbs. Labenne opened a fourth bottle of the Quarts de Chaume. He had drunk most of the other three. Exalted — but not so much as he pretended to be — he talked about the future of France as if France equalled Labenne. He bragged about his great-grandchildren. What arms and legs ! What brains ! Sweat mingled with buttery juice ran down his face. Wiping it, he squinted round the edge of the napkin to see his guests exchanging looks of ironical amusement. Again his inward laughter almost suffocated him. What a pair of idiots ! . . . Making a solemn face, he asked Huet if he really hoped that he would be able to give him, the obscure Mayor of Seuilly, an Under-Secretary's place ? Huet was patronising and evasive, his nose pointing in an ecstasy of political cunning. But after all, he's not simply a fool, Labenne thought : he may even be astute enough to be dangerous. He looked smilingly at Thiviers.

"Don't be alarmed by the future, my dear fellow. I'll see that the mob doesn't hang you."

Thiviers smiled. "Thanks."

I make him uneasy, Labenne thought. He believes that of the three of us he is the power. But he doesn't like my self-confidence or my poor little jokes ; when he looks at me he feels slightly giddy, the next minute he puts it down to liver and decides to take calomel tonight. My friend, you'll need something stronger than calomel to get rid of me. I tell you.

The chicken was followed by a dish of asparagus. Again, Labenne — and by the simplest means, picking up five stalks at once and careless how much butter dropped on his shirt — ate three-quarters of it. Mme Leglard came in, smiling, with her triumph. A vast soufflé, flavoured with a liqueur wine grown in her own vineyard, old in bottle, strong, aromatic, a real *vin madérisé*. She served it, and waited to see them taste it. Labenne flattered her, using all the charm — like the wine, it was squeezed from grapes which had reached "superb rottenness" — in his gross body.

"You've given us the finest meal I have ever eaten, with the most superb wines. Everyone knows that Angevin wines are better than anything in Touraine. So are the great cooks of Anjou the best in France. That is, the best in the

world. Very well " — he filled their glasses — " we drink to Madame Leglard of the St. Maur in Geulin. If I could bring Monsieur Goering here for one meal I could stop the war ! Monsieur Goering, I should say to him, there aren't two ways of enjoying life, of drinking Quarts de Chaume. Stuffed with your pâté, your Loire salmon, your mushrooms in cream, your chickens, your asparagus and soufflé, he would become a Frenchman. He would make himself king of France — Charlemagne II. What a king, what a court ! You would become the Duchesse de St. Maur. . . . In ten, in twenty years' time, France will be the capital of another Frankish empire, and — I swear it — all the best jobs will be filled by Frenchmen. The Germans will have succumbed to our cooking. . . . "

He glanced sideways at his guests. Huet was not listening. His mind, Labenne saw, was following his nose through the undergrowth of his own future. Thiviers smiled — without committing himself. A good little joke, his smile said.

Labenne mopped his face and neck. Directed from the Loire by the long shadows of the poplars, a thin current of air flowed into the room. It was joined by the fragrance of the brandy under his nose.

" But we could do with peace ! " Mme Leglard cried. Her eyes, as bold as Labenne's, were looking for it in the most unlikely places, between her breasts held down by a lace guimpe, in the palms of her hands. " You know we have a camp of nasty fellows at Geulin. Not a quarter of a mile from this room. The scum of Europe. I'm told they're starving. I ask nothing better than to believe it. "

Chapter 50

THE same evening Mme Vayrac expected to dinner her only close friend. She waited in her usual attitude on the couch, her body comfortable in its loose gown, immobile. She could sit patiently for hours. She was not thinking : her senses rather than her mind were alert in their bolster of

flesh. Hearing a sound somewhere in the house, she saw the servant opening a cupboard, feeling in it with blind fingers, striking the iron spoon against the shelf. Moving slightly, her hand broke the skin of the past : rooms, severed faces, even odours, scattered through her like flying sparks. Her eyeballs ached. She rubbed a finger across the lids, and without knowing that it was a gesture of her mother's, moved her thumb across the ends of her fingers — across and across, rubbing away the images for others to come. The surface of her eyes was so scratched that it would not reflect anything new.

When Mme de Freppel came in, she looked up and, from habit, read her mood. She believed she knew Marguerite as well as herself. But what one knows of another person is distorted by the lens, is smaller or greater than the truth. Mme Vayrac had the eye of a servant, sharp enough from its angle.

"Well, my love ?" She had seen at once that her friend was quick with an emotion and eager to talk. What horse is she riding now ? she wondered, with dry kindness.

"How are you, Léonie ?"

Marguerite sat down, pulling the gloves off her hot fingers. She straightened them. She asked other questions. Mme Vayrac was amused by this play. In the old days, Marguerite would not have troubled to set a decent interval between coming in and beginning to talk about herself. Too good-humoured to let it go on, she said,

"You look anxious, my dear girl. What is it ?"

Marguerite looked in her face. "Léonie, I want to have another child. I want Émile's son."

She's forgotten my son, Mme Vayrac thought coldly.

"Well ? Why not ?"

"When I thought of it and spoke to Émile about it," Marguerite said quietly, "I was being clever. It came into my head, and I spoke without waiting to think. Yes, I thought it would convince him that he ought to be against this war. As Thiviers and other sensible people are. . . ."

"Well ?"

"I don't think of anything else now. I think of it every day. I almost believe that when the idea of having a child came into my mind, I made him. I even hope I've conceived."

What a way to speak about it, Mme Vayrac thought. She

felt a savage wish to jeer. For a moment her love for the younger woman became gall. Smiling, she said warmly,

"If you really want, I hope you have."

She noticed that Marguerite was ashamed of her emotion. And well she may be, she thought drily.

"Léonie, I've changed. . . . I've made one mistake after another in my life. It's my own fault I've lost Catherine. It's not too late to begin again, with another child — and this time keep him. And keep Émile. We can have our son. And without all this killing, a decent life. It's what I want now." She looked eagerly at Mme Vayrac.

Léonie would have been put to it to know whether she felt more pity than amusement. . . . Does she truly think she has changed? And supposing she has — suppose miracles — does she think that the way people must live has changed to oblige her? . . . She kept her pity, her shrewd anger, out of her voice.

"Well, my love, I'd help you if I knew how. But what with the war, and investments worth nothing, nothing at all, it seems a poor moment to start a family."

Marguerite hesitated. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that Thiviers had put money for her and Émile in New York. A primitive caution made her hold her tongue. Looking at her friend, she recalled the evening Léonie stole food for her from a stall in Marseilles, hiding it under her coat. And the nights of pain and fever when Léonie sat up, sponging her and putting cotton-wool in her ears to deaden the sound of the café piano. Tears rushed into her eyes.

"Léonie, I know I can trust you. No one else. . . . We shall be all right. Thiviers has bought dollars for us in New York; he has some way of doing it. You must never tell a soul, it would ruin Émile. But you won't. . . . I'm beginning to grow old, I'm forty; you're my oldest and only real friend. I can say anything to you."

"My poor girl. . . ."

"What's past is past," Mme de Freppel said fiercely: "I think of the future now."

The older woman smiled. . . . You should think of the present, the one thing you even half see. . . . She said nothing. Since she was looking down, the glint, a servant's shrewd mockery, in her eyes, was hidden. She got up, unlocked a drawer, and took out Sadinsky's diamond.

Mme de Freppel's face changed. Turning the stone

round and round in her hand, she held it up so that the light darted from it in fangs. Her eyes became grave and fixed, with the seriousness of lust. Suddenly she threw the stone into her friend's lap.

"Take it, I can't afford it."

"Nonsense," Mme Vayrac said, smiling. "You got Schnerb his place, didn't you? Surely he paid up? I thought so. . . . And I have your share of Sadinsky's cheque."

"Don't talk about it," Marguerite said in a light voice. "You know, I still owe Caillemer for the fur cape I bought a month ago. I never paid him for it."

"Why be in a hurry to pay Caillemer? You won't find another stone like this," Mme Vayrac said. She laid it on the younger woman's knee.

Marguerite still hesitated. She weighed the stone in her hand. For a moment Mme Vayrac thought she was going to refuse it again. She was angry. She would not be able to forgive her friend for turning her back on temptation. It would mean that Marguerite denied their long intimacy, the lies they had told together, the sins they had shared, the tricks both had played to come where they now were. . . . And it would make her own triumph, over her father, empty. . . . Leaning forward, she touched Marguerite's arm.

"What's the matter?" she said in a warm voice.

"Schnerb and his place — and Sadinsky and all that—" Marguerite made a confused gesture. "I won't touch them again. . . ."

"Why should you, my dove? But since you have their money you may as well spend it. You can't give it back. Can you?"

She watched Mme de Freppel roll the diamond in its covering and lay it carefully in her bag. She felt the sudden easing and lightness of her own heavy body. A familiar contempt, sly and loving, possessed her; she put her arms round Marguerite.

"There's a dear girl," she said tenderly, "a dear good silly girl. You mustn't let things upset you, we all have to live as best we can — not the life we should like. That's how life is."

Stroking Marguerite's neck, she smiled at her. "Now we'll go into the other room and eat. . . ."

Towards ten o'clock, Marguerite left. Mme Vayrac telephoned to Labenne at once and asked him to come and see her. He told her he had just come home from giving dinner at Geulin to "a pair of half-wits": he had no objection to spending an hour with her. "At least you have both eyes open," he growled.

In the quarter of an hour before he came Mme Vayrac did not think about Marguerite. Not even when she was rolling into a ball years of tenderness — of protecting and making use of Marguerite as she would have used and protected a sister younger and stupider than herself — and the contempt that went with it, and rolling them to one side in her mind. She was sunk by her one great passion. Against it, neither weakness nor loving friendship weighed a puff of air.

Labenne came in smiling, his shirt out, shoulders rolling like a bear's. Taking his glass of brandy in one hand, with the other he plucked his clothes away from his body.

"I'm running like a candle," he grinned. "What weather!"

"You should sit quietly at home," Mme Vayrac said. "As I do."

"And what would that do for me? Tell me that!"

"You would be cool."

"Cool?" Labenne mocked. "Not a soul in the town is as cool as me. Very few in France. . . . My flesh may burn, but I, I'm as cool as a knife. What did you want?"

She was silent for a moment. She respected his energy, but she knew men too well to hope he would do anything unless it suited him. He is a monster of egoism, she thought pensively; and sometimes I admire him.

"You're really anxious to get Edgar released?" she said at last, placidly.

"He could be useful to me."

"Did you know that Mathieu has been warning the Prefect against you? He told him you were helping Edgar — and that Edgar, poor boy, had worked for the German Government."

"Who told you?" Labenne asked. "Madame Prefect, of course."

His eyes, except for a ray spurting between two folds of skin, disappeared. He stretched his arms. Fascinated, Mme Vayrac looked at the hairs springing from tiny black

holes in the strong flesh. What an animal! Corruptly tolerant towards men, as Circe in middle age may have felt towards her herd, she believed in gripping them by their vanities. A man's vices and lusts alter, his vanities never. There are ways of flattering even a peasant — she felt certain that Labenne came to her only to be flattered. Why else should he come? A faithful husband, he never asked to see her nieces, though once he had interfered when it was a question of a police visit. He was too careful to have direct dealings with the people she called "my good little rats" — creatures who in Seully or Paris formed the same civil abscess. It was obvious — he came here to be comforted, morally.

"My dear man," she said affectionately, "you can break Bergeot any time. That smooth fellow Thiviers has been sending money to the States for him. You've only to threaten him with a prosecution——"

"So that was it," Labenne interrupted.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing." He looked at her. "Is that all? Come, old girl, you have something else."

She was keeping her hands folded heavily over a packet of letters in her lap. With a curious feeling of sickness, but deliberately, she handed them to him — a dozen of Marguerite's letters, written on Prefecture notepaper. She had picked out the most compromising, those where Mme de Freppel agreed to help one person to a job, another to a decoration. It would be easy to involve Bergeot. He was discredited by a dishonest traffic carried on from the Prefecture. Labenne read through them without surprise, folding each on to the pile balanced on his knee. When he had folded the last, Mme Vayrac snatched them deftly from him. He looked at her with anger.

"What's this, Léonie?"

"I didn't intend you to keep them," she said, smiling.

She let one of them slip to the floor. Before she could stoop, Labenne put his foot on it. Shaking it open, he read: *Now for your friend Schnerb. I shouldn't mind touching his five thousand francs. . . .* Putting it in his pocket, he looked at her with a teasing smile.

"Thanks for your intention. D'you know what that young monkey Derval told me? People don't drop things by accident. Ergo, you meant me to keep one. . . ."

She shrugged her shoulders. She knew better than to appeal to him. Why give him the happiness of refusing ? . . . She was surprised by an obscure thrill which was certainly not grief. Did I want to punish her ? she thought, confused.

Labenne was smiling broadly. He had drunk so much at dinner that his head was throbbing with words. He felt an easy contempt for her — a discreet loose woman. He could talk to her.

"Listen, old girl," he said, in his charming voice, "you needn't worry. Sooner or later I should have ruined them without your help. D'you want to know how ? I never assassinate people, I encourage them to commit suicide. It's my speciality. . . . What ? Every man except me has his obsession ; it may be a very noble one, a pure ideal, the League of Nations or pacifism, but it ruins him quicker than a woman. He goes for it like a bull, don't you know. Other people and events get only the tail of his eye. That's what it is to nurse an obsession, good or bad. But, but, but, events have their own energy — and one day they rush on our poor little bull, and drop him between the shoulders. And I drag out the body. . . . Our dear Prefect has sworn to defend Seuilly. Splendid, my dear friend, I say to him, splendid — what nobility ! And the moment when Seuilly refuses to be defended will guillotine Bergeot for me as safely as if I had pushed him under the knife. And papa Piriac — if I order him a crown of thorns from the florist he'll spend the rest of his life posing in it for his monument. What ? I can find uses for a monument. . . . And Huet — Huet has studied political science, he knows everything about politics except how to get on in it, he knows every Minister and bores them to death, he talks without listening, always about himself, he intrigues frantically — he enjoys it, it would be indecent if it weren't amusing — not a soul trusts him, he has only to make an honest move for honesty to look like the worst sort of lie. If he were in my way — he isn't — I should only need to give him an infallible tip for ruining his oldest friend, if he has a friend, and he'd strangle himself to do it. . . . Don't imagine, my dear girl, that I shall ever ruin myself. I have no weaknesses. I know I'm a brute, a liar, unscrupulous, greedy, as ambitious as the devil. But a cold devil. I have no ideals. I have no illusions. I haven't a vice, unless it's gluttony. The vices of a peasant. In this dry time, primitive

virtues. I am a peasant. Don't I feel the ground before moving a foot? I've learned to deceive people without being deceived. By God, that isn't all. . . . My friend, I've learned that I can spit on people's ideals while they watch me, if I simply go up to them and say: Dear old chap, I'm spitting on your faith in democracy or justice or goodness or what not, but you understand me, don't you? Then they don't believe their eyes! Simplicity itself, eh? Do you know what, old girl, I could crucify every Frenchman between twenty and thirty and get myself put on the committee of enquiry afterwards! How? By being known as a clever ruthless fellow and, after all — *after all*, the modern man's grace — the only man who understands what happened. . . ."

Mme Vayrac had turned pale. She felt in her wrists and joints a weakness she had not known since she was young and believed in sin. Speechless, she watched Labenne wipe his face on his sleeve, legs grossly apart, eyes covered in oil from the thick lids. Not even flattery finds a hold on him, she thought. Where other men think of loyalty or affection he sees only himself and his family. He will make use of me, without conscience — and betray me or Edgar, coldly, as he says. And then forget us. A monster of egoism — yes. And intelligent. Abominably intelligent. . . . She shuddered.

Labenne got up to go. Mme Vayrac could not move. She was pinched by regret for having handed her friend over to him. . . . A worm of shrewdness lifted its head in her mind.

"Don't forget, I've done everything I can to help you," she said in her deep coaxing voice.

Labenne patted her shoulder.

"Trust Georges Labenne," he said, smiling.

Chapter 51

BERGEOT was speaking to the workers at Thiviers's aircraft factory. He made his speech from a bench in the yard, and Lucien stood immediately behind him, afraid at every moment that he would step backwards. How should he know

that even in the excitement of speaking Bergeot did not lose sight of his dignity ? If only I could see better, he mourned. The evening sun was directly on his glasses, he could only squint sideways at the crowd, and he wanted desperately to see the effect on it of the Prefect's eloquence. On Lucien himself it was terrific. If he had not had Colonel Rienne's promise in his pocket he would have despaired. To be safe here when the Germans were ploughing over the graves of the last war. . . . Bergeot was telling them about a village he had fought through during that war : on one day eight thousand were killed in its ruins ; since then, eight thousand dead Frenchmen had shared the village with a few hundred of the living. Yesterday, he said, the Boches sent their tanks over the poor narrow street of cottages put up hurriedly in 1919 to house the living with the dead, and never bettered because there had not been time. Since 1919 there had been scarcely time to put the fields in order. And today. . . . When he thought of the Germans, Lucien felt a trace of pity for their obedient minds and thick violent bodies. Scarcely any hate for the wretched invader. He had no room for it in his mind beside his impatience to reconcile himself with the eight thousand who were holding the village. . . . The Germans, Bergeot was saying, can be held. On the Marne. . . . If I only get there before they begin going back, thought Lucien anxiously. What a disgrace to arrive in time for a pursuit ! . . . *At Gezaincourt today a union was effected between the Ninth Battalion of the 53rd and eight thousand men of the last war.* . . . In decent words, they met — and the eight thousand spotted at once that Private Sugny had spent his war running after a broken enemy. Horrible !

Dodging the sun, he fixed his gaze on the nearest worker. An oldish man, sun-blackened face parted by his scythe of a nose and cracked everywhere into deep lines. He stood a little in front of the rest, arms hanging. His eyes had been watching anything but the yard or the speaker — the lettuces he was growing at home, his own chair in the doorway, the tables of the bistro where at this moment his neighbours must be saying : What's kept old Pigoult ? After some minutes he turned his eyes slyly and unwillingly to the speaker, he began listening. He listened. Watching him, Lucien saw suspicion, doubt, anger, respect, pity, and again anger, and last of all the shadow of a young grief reflected on

a dry poor face. Strangest of all were his eyes ; through all this, they smiled, with patience, with kindness, with an absence of hope which went far past sadness : it was not sadness, it was a kind of silence, the silence of poverty, the silence of unnumbered generations of poor people, the silence of men as common as the earth. There was pride in this silence. And as Bergeot went on speaking, the narrow bleached eyes became almost joyous. Lucien could see how moved he was only by the strengthening of this weak glow of joy. You might be my father, he thought. He looked at the man's hands, clutched a little in front of him. Yes, there were the very marks — the skin calloused, the scars of old chilblains and hurts.

Bergeot stopped. A crowd of the workers pressed round him. Noisy with the excitement he had released in them, they shook his hand, patted him. Lucien repeated foolishly, "You were splendid, magnificent." He hoped for the chance to say something friendly — but what, unless it could be one of the jokes he had with his father ? — to the elderly workman. But the man had not pushed his way to the front. When Lucien looked round before getting into the car, he saw him still in the same place, looking towards Bergeot with the same air of joyous grief and respect.

"Oh," he murmured, "there was one man you ought to have spoken to."

"Where ?" Bergeot said. He had leaned back and was mopping his face. "Did it go all right ?"

"It was magnificent," Lucien stammered. He was giddy with admiration and happiness. "You've never spoken so well. If they don't make fifty aeroplanes this week it won't be your fault."

"It won't be altogether theirs," Bergeot said. "I heard yesterday that they don't get supplies, and then men are laid off — in fact there's a devil of a muddle. And some deliberate slackness."

"Why don't you go to Paris and put it right ?"

Bergeot smiled at this. He was still excited by his success with the workers. His secretary's belief in him touched him. He was not in the least afraid of disappointing it, and its young energy and warmth flattered him.

As soon as they were back at the Prefecture he gave Lucien a note to take to Mme de Freppel, and told him he could have the evening off. And — "Here—" he took a

fifty-franc note from his pocket: "go and buy yourself dinner at Buran's. You work too hard." He knew that his secretary needed a great many things more than a good dinner, and slammed the door on his thanks with a comfortable feeling of pride. He had made one of the young happy.

In fact, he had made Lucien wretched. . . . What will he think of me when I leave him? . . . He had not dared yet to tell Bergeot about Rienne's promise. All the way to the Manor House he was composing the phrases of a letter he would send back from the Marne — if the worst came to the worst, from the Seine — enclosing the fifty-franc note, "which naturally I could not spend, knowing I was leaving . . . your generosity . . . genius . . . the honour of working for you. . . ." When he reached the Manor House, he forgot everything except his hope of seeing Catherine.

Alone, Bergeot sent the porter to bring him coffee, and began to draft the memorandum he proposed to send to the Minister. Towards nine o'clock Thiviers rang up and asked if the Prefect would see him.

"Why, certainly," Bergeot said. "Come at once."

Slightly uneasy, he wondered whether Thiviers wanted to complain about his speech. He felt the familiar twinge of panic — and contempt. Poor old boy, he said to himself, he's as nervous about his property as an old woman; he'll tell me I've unsettled his workers. If only I could think so!

When the banker came in, Bergeot said with a clumsy touch of defiance,

"Did you approve of my speech? You've had a report about it?"

Thiviers did not smile. "Yes, yes, I realise that you have to make these ridiculous misleading speeches. I didn't come to talk about it. I came to ask why you've changed your mind about a free press. You refused to suppress the *Journal* when Mathieu made his shameful attack on Labenne. Why was Derval arrested?"

"No one has ever accused Mathieu of helping the German army," Bergeot said.

"What do you mean?"

"I had Derval arrested for printing an article about the war which must have frightened his readers to death — if they believed him. And for talking in cafés as though we were defeated, even praising Hitler."

Thiviers looked at him disdainfully. "Who is your café spy?"

"There's no question of a spy," Bergeot said tartly. "He talked to a young officer, a Lieutenant Aulard — and to other soldiers—"

He stopped, vexed that he had given away Aulard's name. He hoped Thiviers had not noticed or would forget it. Looking at him sharply, he was vexed again, by the banker's air of patience and noble calm.

"In my judgement, you have acted foolishly," Thiviers said.

"Your judgement weighs with me. Of course. But ultimately I must judge what is and is not for the public safety."

"And you think that arresting a friendly editor——"

"Friendly!" Bergeot cried. "Whose friend? Monsieur Hitler's?"

"I was not joking. I have helped this young man, Derval. I can always, for instance, go to him and say: Oblige me by *not* printing the fact that Monsieur Bergeot and I are holding large sums in dollars in New York." A sublime smile made him look even kinder. "Can you say the same for your friend Mathieu?"

Bergeot accepted the threat without seeming to notice it. He was always, out of shame, able to hide that he had been alarmed. He felt that you can sometimes repay an insult or an injury, thus cancelling it, but nothing cancels the disgrace of showing that you are wounded.

He looked at Thiviers with an air of frankness. "You think I was wrong to make an example of Derval?"

"Political life would be impossible unless both sides took care not to find examples," Thiviers said. "Leave that to the extremists. Who never — you must have noticed it — never get anywhere. Never reach office. They have no power, and become bitter and unbalanced."

"I'll think over what you've said." Bergeot let himself glance at his littered desk.

"You're busy." Thiviers got up. "It was good of you to see me," he said warmly. "I believe we can still help each other — and you know my affection for you. Good-night, Émile."

"Good-night."

As soon as he was alone, Bergeot said aloud, "Now

what ? ” He struck both hands on his forehead as though he hoped an answer would spring out. The pressure inside his head was terrible. He walked about the room, waiting until he felt calmer before trying to decide where he stood and what he ought to do. . . . Was Thiviers speaking only for himself ? Am I ruining myself ? Am I strong enough to threaten him with an equal exposure ? How strong am I ? . . . At this moment, with a sinking heart, he knew that in the world of high politics he was clay against iron.

He no sooner knew it than he denied it.

I could release Derval without any harm done, he thought. His arrest will have frightened him, he'll be more careful in future. . . .

An honest rage seized him. . . . Let him out, the young beast ! An embusqué. He'll think he can risk anything, with his powerful friends backing him. He'll laugh at me !

Even his vanity was on the side of keeping Derval locked up. I must put my feelings aside, he said to himself. He tried to decide calmly whether self-interest and prudence really added up to the public good. . . .

About eleven o'clock Lucien looked in and said timidly, “ I saw your light under the door——”

“ Well ? What d'you want ? ”

“ Is there anything I can do ? ”

“ No,” Bergeot said. His face twitched. “ What the devil can anyone do in this sink ! One's defeated all the time, by men without vision or honesty.”

“ No, no,” Lucien exclaimed. “ You saw how those men felt today. You can do anything with them.”

“ They're as big fools as you,” Bergeot said cruelly. “ Go to bed.”

Next morning at eight o'clock, when Lucien came into the office, he was startled to find the Prefect already at work. Had he even been to bed ? The greyness of Bergeot's face, its lines, shocked the young man. Remembering his snub of the night before, he said nothing.

An hour later, when Lucien was in the room, the Public Prosecutor rang up. Bergeot spoke to him calmly, almost lightly.

“ You had my message ? Yes, yes, I think we ought to release Derval. . . . What ? . . . Oh, he's had his lesson, we mustn't be dictatorial. . . . Certainly, I agree. . . .”

He put the receiver down and went on with the letter he

was dictating. His secretary had flushed deeply. His hand shook. When he glanced up for a second, Bergeot thought there was even a tear at the back of his blue small eyes. He was seized with fury.

"What the devil is the matter with you?" he said.
"You're stupider than ever this morning!"

Chapter 52

IN the afternoon of June 6th, two men who felt closer to one another than either did to a colleague of his own age, were sitting in a room in the barracks. Both were deeply religious, one a Catholic and the other Protestant; both felt for the Republic a coldness they excused easily by identifying it with its corrupt politicians, Jews and intriguing Freemasons. Like so many friendships, theirs was the closer because neither could see far into the other's heart. It was a polite intimacy. Thiviers was anxious as well about his own great wealth and the powers it gave him. General Woerth had neither money nor social influence. It was natural for him to feel a more-spiritual need for power; he was poor, chaste, and as a soldier obedient, without losing, indeed with an aggravated growth of his pride and his impulse to authority.

He had given M. de Thiviers the only modestly comfortable chair in his room. The other was narrow and wooden: he straddled it, resting his arms on the back, and seemed at his ease in that posture. He had brought his friend here after a meal at Buran's, where they had talked about horses: an unspoken agreement kept them silent on the only thing that occupied both their minds. As soon as Woerth shut the door of his small room, Thiviers spoke.

"What is going to happen now?"

"To the army?" Woerth said.

"To the country," Thiviers said. "To us," he added, after a moment.

"France has lost the war. There is no longer any possibility of avoiding defeat."

"Could it have been avoided?"

"That's not my business," Woerth said; "my business is to see that no useless and foolish action is taken here."

Thiviers bent his head. "War is unspeakably hideous nowadays," he said. "When I think that Seuilly could be wiped out by a dozen young airmen. . . . The very base of society, the safety of property, could be destroyed. France couldn't survive two more years of this war."

"The war is finished. But the danger to society is not. There's still the danger of Monsieur Bergeot's armed mob — I'm speaking of all the Bergeots in France."

Thiviers saw his library collapse in flames, the bust of Socrates and the ashes of his own manuscripts attributed, firmly this time, to death. "Mobs wrecked the Italian factories after the last war," he said heavily. "It could happen here. . . . What are Piriac's orders?"

"He has none," Woerth said.

Thiviers felt rather than heard the slightest possible hesitation in his friend's voice. He is keeping back something, he thought.

"Fortunately," Woerth went on, "I have some authority for hoping that the troops under General Piriac's command, with those facing Italy, will be free to deal with any disorders that might follow a capitulation." He seemed to regret having spoken; he said quickly, "There will be none of the wickedness of 1789. If we had time this evening, I could prove to you that the retreat of our armies today is due to a collapse which started then: we have lost Paris in 1940 because it was lost a hundred and fifty years ago. Materially, morally — they drag each other along — the Republic has ruined us."

"If we were choosing at this moment between defeat and Republican socialism," Thiviers cried, "I should choose defeat."

"There is no choice," Woerth said coldly.

"We have a chance to wipe out an abomination. We must organise an oligarchy — only very few men are fit to have great wealth — we must discipline youth, we must have a Chamber of devoted men. The Republic made mistakes, we must profit by them. It's precisely what Hitler did for Germany. But we have the virtue of our aristocratic families."

"He has his faults," Woerth said. "He's a German. But he saved his country." He paused. "We must try to see to it that he doesn't injure ours."

Thiviers folded his hands. "I have friendly relations with the German bankers. In any case, it's not in their interest to ruin me. So far as that goes, I would trust them rather than Bergeot."

Woerth's interest in his friend's money was platonic; he respected it as an idea, and left him the care of looking after it.

"I can't endure any longer a system resting on lies, atheism, bribes," he said with severity. "And I can't stand aliens — let these wretched people find some other country to betray. Or let them die in their own. If I had the power which only one living Frenchman has — but thank God he is in the Cabinet — I should tell the country frankly that what it needs is work and obedience. I don't enjoy the thought of defeat. But this time a defeat may save us. Without the bitterness of a long war, we shall be able to make reasonable terms — after all, Hitler has proved himself a statesman. No doubt we shall lose Alsace — for the time being — and our colonies. And the Germans will demand the use of the Channel ports against England. It's unpleasant — but defeat isn't victory. We shall have to pay something for it. . . . My only hope now is to be made use of. I can, I think, serve France better than if I were trying to prolong a useless war."

"Count on me to help you," cried Thiviers. "My friends on the other side of our frontiers know how disinterestedly I struggled to save the peace. My crusade was spoiled by this fatal war. I can set off again."

"You can become a lay Pope and direct us !"

Thiviers missed the inflection of irony in the general's voice. His ambition to be a great spiritual leader possessed him so fiercely that it gave him a sort of innocence. The idea that he was a little ridiculous did not touch him. With as much passion, he longed to see his country chastised and to comfort it like a father — this included his workers : he believed sincerely that they were healthy when they were diligent and frugal ; unnatural vices, fostered in them by men who love to destroy a good custom because it is a custom, made them unhealthy and miserable. Their misery made them naughty.

"I shall explain justice," he said simply. "I shall explain that it would be just for all men to live alike. It would be just, and impossible ; the strongest will always rule.

Naturally. And you can't force the strong to be just — if you could, justice and force would be identical, which is absurd. You have only to read a little history. What you can do — and unless you do it, there will always be revolts and civil war — is to see to it that force is accepted as just. A discreet force — that is the secret of peace. The fatality begins when poets or agitators tell the mob of weak people that they are being treated unjustly. They are so happy when they obey — and they obey because they believe that the laws they are obeying are just. Men who tell them anything else are really criminals, they poison society. They should be hanged — quickly and secretly. No public martyrdoms. When I was a child my father told me that the old peasants, the old workers, were always gay. Why? Because they lived by custom, not by thinking about their lives."

"The finest custom is a King," Woerth said. "To have the centre of the nation fixed — no disputes, and no choice. What country ever chooses the best President? They choose the meekest or most cunning." He lifted a hand — he had small fine hands. "With a King we shall have peace."

"Why is it," Thiviers said meditatively, "that in peasant countries — like France and Russia — the mob is always unmanageable, except by a dictator? From one point of view, Germany didn't need Hitler. We needed him much more!"

Leaning back, the general offered to the light a web of fine lines covering his face.

"There are men who profess to be with us," he said coldly, "for whom I feel nothing but distaste."

"Our deputy, who is only thinking of his career."

"I'm not sure that Monsieur Labenne isn't a more compromising ally."

"You can leave him, he's really a peasant, to me!"

"Gladly," Woerth said, smiling. He frowned at once, with his habitual reserve. "And our Prefect? The immoralist? . . . The Minister, who is an atheist, a Jew, will support him — as long as he lasts himself."

"I don't believe that Monsieur Bergeot will go on giving trouble," Thiviers said slowly. "If he does — General Piriac has a strong sense of duty——"

"Yes, yes." Woerth looked down. "He can be of the greatest use."

" To us ? "

" To France," Woerth said.

" The same thing. What terms are you on ? "

" With Piriac ? Oh, I allow him to believe he makes his own decisions."

Thiviers smiled. He leaned forward. " Tell me one thing. You were quoting an authority — is he as optimistic about the future as you are ? "

" I can only speak for myself," Woerth said stiffly.

" But you're satisfied ? "

" The German army," Woerth said in a dry voice, " will be our best, if unwitting, ally."

" That's really your opinion ? "

" I have the deepest admiration for its discipline and equipment. Its leaders ought to be grateful to Monsieur Hitler. He gave them everything they needed. . . ."

" To conquer us," Thiviers said.

" Yes." Woerth stood up quickly. " Why not our turn next ? "

" A strong government will build up the army. Is that what you mean ? "

" It will take ten years," Woerth said. He looked at his hands. " I'm healthier than Piriac."

Thiviers smiled. His friend did not notice it : he had walked to the window, where his slight body was outlined on the bars of the shutter. A deep excitement had seized him, noticeable in his voice.

" You may think it's not just that the innocent people in France should have to suffer for the wickedness of the rest. But there is a higher justice which holds the balances between nations at war, and presses first on one, then on the other side. The destinies of Germany and France are inextricably involved. Each of us was created to give the other lessons in courage, discipline, firmness. When one sinks, through weakness, through its vices, the other becomes a rod to punish it and bring it to its senses again. Foch was the real saviour of Germany, not Hitler. Hitler, and not Pétain, not Weygand, is just about to save France. If an equilibrium were ever established between our two countries, they would become the masters of the world. That may happen, in another century or so — we can't know what an all-seeing Justice has in mind for us. All we know is that the hour of our greatest humiliation and our greatest triumph

is at hand. You and I, my friend, won't be those servants who hired themselves at the tenth hour. We may even be the first."

"You've forgotten," Thiviers said with his gentle smile, "that the first shall be last."

The two men smiled at each other with the same good faith, the same, perhaps involuntary, understanding that made it possible for the dry, passionate and ambitious soldier to suit himself so well with the Protestant banker.

They shook hands, and Thiviers went off to call on Mme de Freppel. The mistress of the immoralist was the second ally he proposed to himself in this crisis.

Chapter 53

ON his way to the Manor House he did not try to arrange his thoughts. He was in that beatitude he always brought away from seeing Woerth, and talking about his own future. It seemed to him that they had been talking of his future. I shall not enter the government, he said to himself. My work — no one else can do it — will be done in my study, or as a travelling ambassador. Since I'm above politics, I shall be respected in every chancellery. . . . The thought of his memoirs crossed his mind. If Montaigne, he thought, had been an ambassador of my kind, he would have written my greatest book. . . . It is delicious to feel certain of fame; Thiviers felt cool and relaxed. He complimented himself on having, once and for all, reached a point in his life when the chapter Woman, the chapter Distractions, was closed.

Mme de Freppel was expecting him, in the small sitting-room with a window facing the Loire and a second opening on to a rose-garden. Thiviers disliked the scent of roses, indeed of all flowers; as soon as he came in, she shut it out. The room began to fill up with air from the Loire. Even that left on the lips a taste of young vines.

"I can't," she said, smiling, "close both windows. The evenings are much too warm."

Thiviers noticed how hot it still was. In his exaltation

he had overlooked it, and now, feeling tired, he was vexed by her fresh look. He refused a drink, and told her, making no bones about it, why he had come. He hoped to startle her.

"The retreat has become a rout, you can take it as certain that the terms of an armistice are being discussed already. Nothing short of capitulation, instant, complete, can save France——"

She interrupted him. "Must you talk as though you learned how to talk at all from the leaders in the *Times*? . . . Nannie, his *Times* for Master Robert, please! . . ."

Furious, Thiviers got up brusquely. He walked to the window, with an idea of snubbing the Loire.

"You'll have bats coming into the room," he said.

"They don't frighten me," Marguerite said. "I'm not a young woman."

"At least you could listen to me. What I have to say is important. And to you and Émile."

"Yes, yes, you're going to tell me to keep Émile quiet. I'm doing all I can."

"It's not enough," he said harshly. "Émile, like any other civilian authority, has one duty, only one — to see that there are no local disorders. Suppose — I say, suppose — that what he calls his volunteers were to give trouble, serious trouble, before the armistice is signed. Or after. The army would be forced to act, there would be bloodshed, people killed — and then what? Civil war. Hideous. . . . But — it won't happen, strong measures are being taken, there'll be no volunteer guard in Seuilly. Whatever happens, we have a sensible general in control. There's only one question. Is Émile going to join the right side — now? Or is he going to be broken? He's not a fool. Surely you can make him see that in politics it's all a question of making yourself indispensable to the right man at the moment when he needs you and you can dictate your own terms."

He was surprised that she did not become agitated or defiant. Hands folded in her lap, she was looking at him as though in another moment she would be sure to see a weakness she could use. He made himself stiffer and more upright. He was not going to reopen the chapter Weakness — not he. The Thiviers of the memoirs was at hand to tell him what to say and do. He himself need do nothing.

She was silent so long that, without meaning to, he spoke again.

"You do want to save Émile?"

"Yes, yes. . . . Not only for his sake."

"For your own," Thiviers smiled.

She took no notice of his sarcasm. Her gaze was only meditative and calm. He had the uneasy sense that she was judging him, not, as always before, with the eyes of an experienced clever woman, but by some impersonal scale. Where could she have borrowed — she who was all instinct and impulse — the detachment of a real mind? He was far from guessing that she believed she had cut the nerves holding her to her past. This illusion was giving her a feeling of strength.

"I'm thinking of our future," she said. "I want Émile to be sensible. But you must give me time."

"Are you mad? Don't you understand anything I've told you? You have, at the very most, a fortnight. Less, perhaps."

He saw, without satisfaction, that at last he had frightened her. Her eyes became those of the clever animal he knew.

"A fortnight!"

"Perhaps only a week."

"But I can do nothing with Émile in a week! You don't know him, he's too stubborn. If he's going to stay in Seully, he must go on being the great man — he must have time to put something else in the place of his absurd scheme——"

"In a week he can be ruined. Finished. With no future at all."

"But——" She put her hands over her eyes. "Oh, my God, it's too late. Too late. I'm too tired. I was mad."

Thiviers felt horribly weak. He sat down. "What do you mean?"

"I'm too old. At my age, you can't get away from the past. There's been too much of it, I'm too old."

She means that she has told too many lies, he said to himself. But why does she want suddenly to be a young woman, young enough for her meanest lies to be still in her future? He was seized by a jealous rage. He felt jealous of her hopes, her despair, the future itself. He could not bear to think that she might, after all, escape punishment for her lies, greed, and want of conscience. She must be punished. She must suffer for her vices.

"You can do what you like with Émile. Warn him that if he persists in behaving badly I shall tell the proper authori-

ties that he's hiding money in the States. And I shall publish the fact. You needn't think I shall be involved. I can take care of myself. I'm not a fool."

She was looking at him with an insulting calm.

"No, you're a blackmailer. You are, aren't you?"

Thiviers reached her by pushing aside a table holding some glasses. They fell and broke. He was ridiculous; he threw himself on her and the buttons of his jacket gave way, making him still more ridiculous. She escaped from him, quite easily, and stood smiling.

"What were you going to do?"

"Kill you."

"Oh, no," she said with a smile, "you were going to hate me by making love to me. What a dangerous creature you are."

Thiviers was still beside himself. But his mind had begun to work. Clutching his jacket he said quietly,

"You ought to know me. How long were you my mistress, and how much of my money had you put away before I asked you to corrupt Bergeot?"

Marguerite cried out. "You did nothing of the kind! *You asked me to invite him to the house."

He felt a deep sense of relief and comfort that he had broken her. "You didn't tell him you were my mistress. Just as you didn't tell me you were his until I was on the point of finding it out for myself."

"You were always so vain."

"I daresay — but you made use of me."

He had not been able to keep back this cry of vanity and grief. It lost him all the advantages he had gained. He watched her seat herself calmly, folding her hands on her knees. She was in complete possession of herself again. She has the will of a hard peasant, he thought. He felt humiliated before her.

"And now that I know exactly what you are," Marguerite said steadily, "and what I can count on from you, I'll tell you how far you can count on me."

"Well?"

"I'll persuade Émile — to do anything you want. As soon as I can. Soon. On your side you must promise me two things. One, not to give away his investments in America. Two, not to punish him later on for being necessary to you now."

"How well you understand politics," he said.

"I understand that you are ashamed of having had a mistress, and vexed that I'm happy. And you know that you can punish me through Émile—" She broke off, as though she had been on the tip of saying something more — which was her secret. "Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"Your word of honour."

Thiviers wrapped himself in his dignity. "I've promised."

Mme de Freppel stood up. He was being sent away. His body, when he moved it, felt bruised, and only obeyed his sense of dignity out of disgust for itself. He had the courage, or was it insensibility? — or he may have been seeking the thread of his memoirs — to look at himself in the mirror.

As soon as he was at home, he shut himself in his bedroom. His vanity, weaker than his sense of sin, could not help him. Once the flood of guilt reached the level it had reached now, he was always helpless. As he prospered and became richer — two wars had more than trebled his income — and the more he was praised for his piety and uprightness, the stronger and more nagging was his secret fear. Simple and affable with his equals, generous except to workers, honest in his business dealings unless he were dealing with a detested government — when he felt entitled to squeeze — a kind faithful husband, rationally but deeply pious, he felt himself to be less safe than many sinners. And it was Marguerite's fault. She was his sin. Through her he had learned that he had no control, not the slightest, over his lower self. It was only when he fell in love with her that he found out he had another self than the one which sat at its desk, visited prime ministers, and day in day out turned everything it heard and saw into grist for the mills of its spirit. The pleasure she had given him, the joy of having a supple body near his, the gratitude she made him feel — not to speak of his delight in her freaks of gutter humour — were all vices of that lower self. All — and in its least forgivable shape — evil.

Wherever he looked now, he saw her. She was lying back in his armchair, her clothes folded across another — he adored her habit of folding a garment neatly as she took it off, learned, if he had only known it, from undressing in rooms

where the carpet would have soiled any garment dropped on it — watching him from those eyes which reminded him of an animal or a loyal child. He groaned. His body was on fire. Terrified by the beating of his heart, he lay down on his bed, and felt there only the warmth and shape of her body. His torments grew beyond bearing. He looked at the carafe of water on his night-table and thought of pouring it over himself. "I'm yours," he said aloud, "only yours." And my immortal soul? he thought. You might, he said to God, help me a little; I only need help! — And you, answered God, might see your way to confessing. — But I've been doing nothing else! — It's unfortunate, that is to say, natural, God said, but in fact, ever since I began noticing you, you have only confessed your dear sin, not a word about the other. Not a word of your avarice. . . . Although he had been taking part in this debate for several years, Thiviers did not hear it. He was deaf from habit. His mind had so many habits by now that it was nearly dead.

A sudden hope drove him along the corridor to his wife's room. This had been one of her bad days, and she was lying down, covered, in spite of the warmth of the evening, by an eiderdown. Her lips were so pale that they seemed made of flesh older and drier than her face. She forced herself to smile at him.

Looking at her, he said, "Nini, I'm so unhappy."

"What is it?" she said joyously, "what's the matter with my Robert? My poor Robert."

"Your poor Robert would like to pray with you."

"Yes, that cures everything," Nini murmured.

She could not get up, but she closed her eyes and offered her silent prayer. Her aching body relaxed a little, she had a feeling almost of well-being. This pain in her back, this stiffness of her arms, were nothing really but the awkwardness of a young girl: the God she was praying to was the absent-minded God of those days, part of her life but not much concerned with her. Robert lifted his face from his hands; it was serene now, and she felt a thrill of joy.

While he was on his knees, Thiviers's fingers had closed over a feather on the eiderdown. Behind the prayers, behind his agonised appeals for calm, he felt the nearness of some other feeling. It was a memory, an image, it belonged to the past; only to remember that he had been free once soothed him. . . . He was in the courtyard of his grandmother's

house near Luynes, the house that was his now. Nothing was distinct or clear, the brightness round the little figure of the child was delusive, but the child was happy, someone had tickled the palm of his hand. What is it ? he asked. A goose feather, they said, for a very little goose. . . . He got to his feet. In his relief, he smiled eagerly at his wife.

" Did it come right ? " she said.

" Yes."

It was not true. The despair, the torments, seized him again. He was too polite, too kind, to disappoint her : he smiled, and talked to her affectionately, questioning her about her day, had her sister called, was she pleased with the eau-de-cologne he had ordered ? She was so grateful that he felt sad. I am defrauding her of the kindness I pretend to feel, he said to himself.

He went away. The feather was still clinging to his damp fingers. Brushing it off, he felt once more a breath, only a breath of the past, the sensation of ease and brightness. Someone must surely have lifted him up then, and carried him away. Where, where ? . . . Oh, my God, he sighed, comfort me.

He was so tired when he reached his room that he undressed at once and got into bed. His pain had become a dull feeling that he was nothing. A failure. And now he did not even know whether he wanted to punish Marguerite or save her.

Chapter 54

RIENNE made time this evening to go to the Prefecture ; it was on his conscience that he had done nothing for Mathieu's Prussian friend. He had spent the day, and the night before, with Michel Ollivier, visiting all the advanced posts. He had had less than an hour's sleep, and, as always with him, fatigue had so sharpened his senses that he had only to look at a scene to know what it was hiding. It was during a week of overwork and sleepless nights in January that he had learned the truth about this war. The army, bored and inert, was waiting behind its Chinese Wall ; Woerth had

prophesied that this state of peace would last indefinitely, and was lecturing his staff to that effect. After one such lecture, Rienne went out into the streets, the singularly quiet streets, and heard the trees on the Quai Gambetta creaking with the wheels and harness of a regiment moving up to the trenches; a young woman passed him smiling, and he thought of Rheims in the last war; at Thouédun, when a farmer talked to him about the spring wheat, he saw the fields of beetroot of the Pas-de-Calais before they were trodden out of shape, and he saw the colour of the Marne in the Loire, and the frost of January 1916 covering the roofs in 1940.

This evening, the evening of June 6th, when the Germans had forced the Somme, everything reminded him of peace. He passed a line of tanks in a side street and noticed the tranquillity of the houses, grey pages covered with an old writing. Two young soldiers were lounging outside a house, listening to the wireless playing a foolishly languid waltz; a woman as thin and delicate as a spectre in broad daylight smiled at them between the curtains. The air was warm and soft. A salt breath came from the Loire, with the cries of swallows darting between the islands, the blond river stretching itself after a day of silence and heat, not even an aeroplane in the remote sky. At midnight there would be only a thread of darkness, not wide enough to keep the day from touching fingers with the day. Now and then a fugitive scent met him; it was escaping from the gardens behind the high walls and from vines outside the town.

Why this certainty of peace? It must be a promise, France giving up the stored riches of twenty years. But why now? Why at this moment? He was surprised to feel this peaceful scene stranger and more alarming than anything he knew about the war.

He found his foster-brother sitting doing nothing. Another break in the order of things.

Bergeot did not give him time to speak. "You've come about Derval."

"About——?"

Seeing, too late, his mistake, Bergeot said jauntily,

"Oh, you didn't know that Derval was released this morning? It's not important — but I thought you might be surprised, since you're not a politician and you don't understand the ins and outs——"

"No, I don't understand," Rienne said. He was as calm as if he had heard of a defeat.

"I don't yearn to be a dictator," Bergeot said, smiling. "Derval has learned his lesson, he won't give any more trouble; in fact he'll be so grateful to me that I shall be able to use him—"

An instinct made Rienne cut him short before he could say anything base. Always, in judging people, he allowed elbow-room to self-interest, meanness, cowardice: these were all purely human qualities, and he was so careful with human beings that he could afford to be implacable towards the effect, when one of them behaved with only too much nature. When it was a question of Émile, he turned to account even these human tricks, and praised him for being shrewd and cautious. . . . Without knowing what he was doing, he spoke sharply, to stop Émile destroying himself.

"What makes you think Derval will give up chattering about defeat? You can't believe it. You don't make misjudgements of that kind. You've been overruled. Who?"

Bergeot spoke with an air of relief and frankness.

"Thiviers. He insisted."

"Why need you have obeyed him? Is he the Prefect?"

He listened closely while Bergeot explained what he called the situation. When a public man falls back on the situation to explain one of his actions he is hiding a motive he dislikes the look of. . . . "I'm responsible for order. I'm not Mathieu, I can't quarrel with a man of Thiviers's influence, and respected as he is. It would do more to shake confidence than any of Derval's indiscretions. You must see that, Bonamy. Even if you're so fond of Mathieu that you can't see the harm he does with his rat's teeth——"

You have every reason, Rienne thought, to be grateful to Monsieur de Thiviers. Without him, where would you be? . . . He was ashamed to be looking for excuses for Émile. All the more that until now he had had to defend him only against critics who accused him of too much energy. The very fact that Émile was making excuses for weakness and self-interest made Rienne feel that he himself was guilty. It was horrible. *I am horrible*, he thought. Perhaps he is ill. . . . What is disgraceful about an illness, even a moral illness? . . . He felt ashamed because he could not, with truth, claim that he had behaved vilely or dishonestly for the sake of his career.

"You're overworking," he said to Bergeot.

Bergeot looked at him in astonishment. . . . Has he heard a word I've been saying? . . . Contempt for Bonamy's simple-mindedness gave way in him to pity — for himself. He let his head and arms sink wearily.

"You think that having good ideas, a decent policy, is enough," he said bitterly. "You couldn't be more mistaken. Without family or other connections, they're useless. Worse than useless. Harmful. At the moment I can rely on the Minister's support. Tomorrow he may be sacked."

His bitterness shocked Rienne. How much energy that Émile ought to use against Labenne and Derval was being drawn off into it! If he had never gone into politics, would he have caught this illness? Of course not. He was healthy all through. . . . He closed his mind against the fear that Émile's illness had been born with him.

"You didn't always think like that," he said.

Bergeot's face was distorted for a moment. "I've learned."

"Thiviers——"

"I owe everything to Thiviers," Bergeot interrupted. "You misjudge him. He's a patriot and honest."

"Half a dozen men of his honesty can ruin France."

Bergeot shrugged his shoulders. "You're impossible."

"Since you won't see that Derval is locked up, I shall," Rienne said sharply. To put himself in the wrong, he lost his temper. "I should like to shoot him to encourage other embusqués. And I have something else to say to you. Why was the order to release Captain von Uhland cancelled?"

"Cancelled?"

"Ah. Didn't you know?"

Bergeot frowned. "Yes, of course. There were reasons" — he hesitated — "of security."

"But you were satisfied, and the police were satisfied." Rienne gave him a calm look. "Did you cancel your own orders?"

"No one else cancels my orders," Bergeot said furiously. "If you want my opinion, far too much fuss is being made about these foreigners. They came here to please themselves, now they think they have a claim on us. Absurd. I have too much to do to bother about them."

"Very well."

Bergeot's face changed suddenly. It took on an air of

innocence and youth. He hurried across the room and laid his hand on Rienne's arm.

"Don't lose patience with me, Bonamy," he said quietly, almost humbly. "I can't smash walls with my head. I'm doing my best. You're a soldier, you don't know the difficulties."

Rienne felt hope and warm grief. It was bad that Émile had to defend himself. And a sign of grace. Again he felt that it was he who had failed. He suffered because — unless it was a little in his vanity — Émile was not suffering. In the end, his vanity may be more use to him than I am, he thought.

"Take care of yourself," he said, smiling.

He was going to see Jean Mourey. When he was hurrying down the lane from the Prefecture, a woman came out of one of the poorer houses. She hesitated when she saw this stick of a soldier, and half smiled at his thinness and his long fine nose and long arms. But he was so correct that he was reassuring. She asked him if there was any news.

What news? Rienne thought. That a vulgar illness is undermining one of the healthiest men in France? "What are you expecting?" he said gently. "You won't hear anything now until you hear about another battle of the Marne."

She looked at him gratefully. If no other family in Seully slept quietly tonight, hers would.

This being Mourey's last night in his house, Abbé Letourneau had walked in from Thouédun to share it with him. When he came into the room and saw them both sitting there at a table on which were two bottles of wine and three glasses, Rienne stepped into any evening of the last war — and without a touch of the anger he felt today when he saw the children of 1919 in their clumsy uniforms. Here he felt consoled and safe. If nowhere else, here he would find a grief he knew by heart, gestures, a phrase, that the sickness of memory had not altered.

"Did you smell trees burning?" Letourneau asked him.

"No."

"I could smell them when I came down the hill from the village. The Germans must have dropped incendiary bombs among the Seine woods. There's a very light breeze from the north-east. . . . Do you remember the acres of fruit trees they made time to destroy in '17, when they were going back? Even now I find it hard to forgive them for it. Who

knows the patience and faith that go into a sound orchard? The life of two or three generations wasted. They don't respect life."

"They destroy like animals," Mourey said. "And we — we destroy because money is the only thing we respect. Nothing has any power here except money."

He passed his hand over the stone fireplace. In the room above, his few clothes had been folded into a bag; down here were eight packing-cases of books and papers. He had been alone for three days, his wife had gone, taking the children to his sister in Bergerac. She would stay there a few weeks until he had found a house he could live in; in the meantime Letourneau would give him and his books a room at Thouédun. He was restless. He had not known that he would miss his wife, but now in every room he found traces of her printed lightly over the marks of the past. He realised that the third of his life she had shared outweighed the rest in warmth and kindness. Now he saw her, moving through the rooms with the absorption of a child in her tasks. In their bed where he used to come after a night spent on his book, knowing that he had wakened her only by her stillness, he was aware of her body as never when he could rest a hand on it. Oh, my love, he said. He wrote it to her — but what sense is there in writing, *Oh, my love*, when you have not said it?

"That's true," the priest said slowly. "In the last hundred years we've turned everything into money. Including our future. We are too thrifty to have children. To save our property, to be better off at the end of our lives than we were at the beginning. Our prudence and thrift have ruined us. . . . Avarice is the meaning of the last twenty years. It explains why we bought Allies. And it explains our treachery to them and our weakness. How can any country defend itself with a few regiments of only sons?"

"We are in fact defending ourselves," Rienne said.

Letourneau did not answer. Stretched out uncomfortably in his chair, his arms hanging, he stared at nothing. Rienne knew this look of absence; it meant that he was holding his tongue because it is no use answering fools.

"You think we're doing badly," he said, vexed.

"All I think," Letourneau said mildly, "is that a unique culture, the richest in the world, the most nearly perfect, the most sensible, the supplest, the most joyous, has been

allowed to starve. For the sake of economy. We have economised ourselves to death."

"Robbing future generations of this house to add a few thousand francs to Monsieur Labenne's income," Mourey said.

"If all they have lost is your house——" Letourneau said.

"You're angry, both of you, because you're not fighting," Rienne said. "I feel that myself," he added softly.

"I can't promise, if things get worse, not to fight," the priest said. "I have a bad temper."

"My God," Mourey said, "I'd burn this house myself rather than hand it over to the Germans. And Paris and Chartres with it."

"That may happen," Rienne said. "Another of our national vices—you can credit it against our thrift or avarice—is freedom."

"Ah," Letourneau said, "when we have lost it we shall find another name for it. Perhaps simpler. Look, I shall say, there's a magpie. And you'll hear, Look, there's our freedom. And our dead friends. And our immortality."

Mourey had kept out his best wine—there were two bottles of it—an admirable Vouvray. Nothing insistent in it: it was both delicate and robust, moderately smooth, moderately lively. It had even a slight sharpness, a trace of the sea air which had penetrated this far up the Loire before the tang of seaweed was overborne by the scent of the vines themselves.

"To tomorrow," he said, lifting his glass.

"A very good little wine," Letourneau said, smiling.

"You say that we French adore freedom," Mourey said. "We adore it in ourselves, not in each other. A few of us—Montaigne—understand it better than any people in the world: all the rest feel about it like Napoleon—something to use, and deny to the others. The paradox of France. Freedom, now, here, is freedom to abuse, to deny, to suppress. You'll see—our Thiviers will betray France rather than risk their beloved liberty. For which," he said, looking at Letourneau, "they have found another name already. Their security, they call it. Or their prudence."

"I don't believe it," Rienne said. "For one Thiviers there are a thousand, a million of us!"

Mourey stroked the wall behind his chair. "How large

ought a cancer to be before you'll allow that it's dangerous ? ”

Rienne scarcely heard him. His sense of well-being — in a room which tomorrow would be empty and handed over to the house-breakers — was too firm. Without knowing, he had tuned his ears to pick up only reassuring sounds, the noise of an aeroplane in the distance, the tap-tap of Mourey's fingers on the side of his chair, as he used to hear it when Mourey, off duty, was reading in the cellar they shared in front of Morlancourt. How easy after twenty years to slip back into the old habits. Even if habit was a sort of death, as Péguy said, it was at least a friendly sort in a world which has too sharp an acquaintance with brutal uncontrolled unfriendly dying. He stood up, reluctantly, to go back to the barracks. It is much easier to live in the last war than to accustom yourself to this.

His two friends came with him as far as the Quai d'Angers. It was as dark as it would be this June night, with a cindery pallor in the sky like a dying fire. Later, half a moon would rise high enough to drown the few darker shadows.

The smell of burning trees was very distinct. It came into Seully from the direction of Chartres, crossing the plain of the Beauce and the Pleiades of valleys, woods, patchwork of grain and clover, webs of roads, tougher network of paths, the banks of rivers, hectares of vines, to reach at last the vines and sandbanks of the Loire. The Loire — so placed that it could carry sounds from every part of France, parish bells, footsteps in houses, in village streets, in old gardens. No sound was too delicate or too powerful to be picked up by its fingers, by Cher, Indre, Vienne, Loir, and transferred to the warm hollow of its hand.

“ Now do you smell the trees ? ” Letourneau said.

“ Yes.”

“ It's the first time in Seully,” the priest murmured.
“ I don't like it.”

“ It smells of autumn,” Mourey said.

Rienne left them disputing how near was the fire. Could it be as far as the Seine ? . . . As soon as he reached the barracks he got Ligny to send him to General Woerth. He talked about Derval. Woerth listened with a bored air for a minute, then yawned and said coldly,

“ I see no point in interfering. If the civilian authorities have released him, they must have sound reasons. I'm not interested.”

Chapter 55

DAYS of bright sun and terrible heat. As hour by hour the war became clearer — all the despair, the anger, the bitterness, the strategic withdrawals, the terror, on one side, all the triumphs on the other — Bergeot recovered his confidence. The Germans had crossed the Aisne, they reached Rouen, all the English had gone home and their aeroplanes had returned cruelly to bomb Abbeville, Amiens, Beauvais and set fire to the forests of the Ardennes : the Germans had crossed the Seine near the sea. In four days half a million German soldiers passed a hand over the provinces of the north and north-west, a hand which scooped up towns, villages, fields, the bakery and the parish church, the children's toys and their little bodies, unwashed even for burial, the rivers, the poplars, the walnuts, the beetroots, the wheat, the vine and the house — scooped up and poured them away over their shoulders like emptying a cup. Even the wireless now gave out that the army, everywhere standing its ground, had been driven to the Seine at Rouen : another such stand would bring them beyond Rheims to the Marne. And who knew if any of it was any use ? Or if the enemy, convoyed by tanks, would not be there waiting for them ?

Émile Bergeot saw all these disasters cutting the tangle of his. There would be a crisis of resistance. All the intrigues and jealousies of men like Thiviers and Ernest Huet would be shoved aside, and men of his sort would lead. It was his moment. Moment of the brave prefect of Seuilly-sur-Loire. And Seuilly a knot in the line stretched in front of the Loire, denying to the Germans the better half of France, denying them Provence and the Limousin, denying Orléans, Moulins, Limoges, Bergerac, Agen, Foix, denying the Garonne, the Vézère, the Rhône and the black pâtés of the Dordogne. His spirits rose with the danger. The crisis was his safety, his escape from his own blunders and indiscretions and Thiviers's threats.

He shared his joy with Lucien. Ashamed to leave him, the young man asked Rienne to give him another month.

During these days Émile Bergeot was what he would have been if fate had arranged for him to be born at a time when

prudence was a smaller virtue than simplicity and faith. They were his greatest days. Who knows how much accident enters into the greatness of great men, and whether Clemenceau or Joan of Arc would have been great in June 1940?

On the 10th, a Monday, he saw General Piriac at the barracks. The two men faced each other across the bare table in Piriac's room, the little civilian confident, the soldier severe and gloomy. Bergeot was astonished by the energy in Piriac's voice when he spoke of the war. The general had become older in the last week, he had reached another stage of fatigue and decay. But a spring had broken through the ground in these ruins; he talked in a firm voice about the possibility of defeat, the mistakes which had led them to disillusion and disaster, the effort to push back a steel wave with bare hands, the refugees "up there", the fire from heaven falling on Arras, Dieppe, Havre. At any moment now it might fall on Seuilly. At this the spring sank feebly.

"I love Seuilly," he quavered, "it's my whole life—" he meant that it was his youth and his success — "I can't bear the thought of it being destroyed."

One egoism easily recognises another. Bergeot realised suddenly that the old general was longing — with one of those senile passions which are crueller than any youthful desire — for the moment, at the height of the tragedy, when the hero reveals himself as a king, or simply as a hero. Piriac had had his triumphs as a soldier, a little against his will, a little due to accidents which had associated him with victories won in spite of his belief that they were going to be defeats. His final triumph was to be sent here when he should have been retired. But it was not a real triumph: neither the Government nor the General Staff ever consulted him. And he felt himself so apt to advise! . . . They'll send for me, he must be thinking; Pétain — I always supported him against the fire-eaters — will remember to send for me, I shall help him to save the country. I shall save the country! . . . The old general's ambition was so nearly a caricature of his own that Bergeot pitied him warmly. What government engaged in a desperate struggle would ask a soldier of seventy to help it? . . . This poor devil is going to be cruelly disappointed. . . . He used all his charm to recreate between them that relation of father

and son which had been so useful to him in the past. He succeeded so far that Piriac tapped his cheek with a hard finger, calling him "my boy". . . .

A film had come over the general's eyes. Pressing on every word with his full weight, he said,

"The thing now is to put an end to useless slaughter."

Bergeot hid his pity. "Useless?"

"Quite useless. It's too late now for anything except surrender. I'm speaking to you frankly, my boy."

Oughtn't I, Bergeot said to himself, to try and save the reputation of a brave soldier? "Even if we're beaten on the Loire there's still the Massif Central," he said gently. "Marseilles, the new capital of France."

"Civilian chatter," Piriac said curtly. "Since yesterday to talk of resisting on French soil is only ridiculous."

"Isn't North Africa French soil?" Bergeot said. "Think, sir — that may be where we shall teach the Germans that force is not justice, tanks are not authority. . . . And the English will have come back——"

A malicious look came into Piriac's face and twitched its folds slightly. "The English? What English? I haven't seen any." He moved his hands. "Monsieur Bergeot, last night I dreamed——"

He stopped, and let his head sink forward. Lately, his dreams had been so vivid that he not only remembered them, but at moments during the day felt the dream hovering above him like a vulture. His dream last night was that he was speaking at the dedication of a war monument: workmen were busy near it and he struggled madly to raise his voice above the clatter of picks; then he saw that he and the monument were in a war cemetery, the graves were being opened to take in the dead of this war, young men with their hands caught in their wounds: the air thickened and clung to him like a membrane and he woke up sobbing.

"No, no," he mumbled, looking into the Prefect's face, "you weren't at Verdun, Monsieur Bergeot. You don't know what it was like. If you had ever lived in a graveyard, you would want to end this war before all France becomes one Verdun."

"Wouldn't even that be better," the Prefect said, "than its becoming one concentration camp?"

Piriac only said again, this time with contempt, "You're a civilian, you're talking nonsense."

"None of us is altogether a civilian. I went through the last war."

Piriac shook his head.

"As things are," Bergeot said, "it's necessary for me to ask you for instructions. You have been advising me to do nothing."

"I have not had any new orders," Piriac said, with sudden clearness.

Bergeot did not believe him, and couldn't believe that he was lying. I ought to have seen General Woerth, he thought. . . . He was seized by arrogance which he took to be strength of will. If Piriac really has no orders, the war must be going a little better, and I have more time than I thought, he said to himself. . . . Throwing aside, in his joy, his care not to shock the old man, he told him that he had notices ready to put up, calling on the able-bodied men to enrol for rescue work in air raids, and the women as nurses and bakers. He let himself become eloquent. Seuilly would be a fortress, with as many strong points as it had houses. Its people, too busy to have time to wonder which way to run, would get themselves killed in the ruins of their houses without asking whether they could trust those shysters in Paris. ". . . they'll be thinking of the human value of their houses more than of the bed inherited from a father and to be passed on to the son conceived in it. Of course they'd rather live, but you'll see that they can still die as easily as when they were really soldiers. . . ."

A little flame moved in Piriac's eyes. He was touched.

"If I'm ordered to defend Seuilly," he said, "I shall defend it to the end."

"Then you'll allow me to have my volunteers——?"

"I won't forbid it. I shall pray that Seuilly will be spared." His voice trembled. "My boy, try to be pure in heart," he muttered, "we are being scourged, all of us, for our sins. What a disaster this war is. And what an honour for any leader brave enough to tell people the truth!"

Fumbling in the drawer of his table, he brought out a thing like a flat chestnut, half the size of his broad palm. "Look."

"What is it?" the Prefect asked.

"A seed. The seed of some tropical plant. I used to play with it when I was a child. My sister found it last week in a camphor box and sent it to me."

Smiling, he moved his thumb over the glossy surface. An infantile joy softened his face. "Feel it," he murmured, laying it gently on Bergeot's hand.

Bergeot gave it back to him with an incoherent phrase. He was taken aback.

On his way to the Prefecture he puzzled over Piriac's statement that he had had no orders yet to expect the active defence of the Loire. If it were true, it could only mean that the General Staff did not expect defeat on the Seine. His heart sank. If he were not, after all, to be in the front line, he would have to go on struggling with his colleagues and his patron Thiviers. . . .

Lucien Sugny was in his room, at the telephone. Sighing with relief, he handed over the receiver. "Paris is coming on the line, sir." It was Bergeot's only close friend in the Government. All the Ministries were packing to move to Tours this evening. . . .

When he put the receiver down, Bergeot's eyes sparkled ; his face was one triumphant smile, as his tired little body was a rod of ambition. He told Lucien the news. "Now for it," he said calmly, joyously.

Lucien could not speak. He was suffocated by his admiration.

Chapter 56

THE first thing Labenne saw when he went out the next morning, were Bergeot's notices. They had been posted overnight. He read one through, catching hold of a passer-by to read it with him. "Do you see yourself with your wife's broom sweeping up German tanks?" he asked him. "I'm lucky, I have my Louis-Philippe cannon" — he jerked his head at the gun mounted in the courtyard. The man laughed. Good, Labenne said to himself, he'll repeat that as his own.

He went directly to Thiviers.

"Have you seen the new mobilisation notices?"

"What mobilisation?"

"Our gallant Prefect is calling up his storm-troopers.

It's the next move — with the Germans in Rheims and across the Marne. They'll be in Paris before the end of the week. The right moment to begin calling out the mob ! ”

He watched Thiviers's cheeks pale and his hands seek each other as they did when he was agitated. A little astonished, Labenne saw signs of indecision on his long face. What's he up to ? he wondered. Thiviers's voice was calm.

“ The Government is at Tours,” he said.

“ For how long ? ” Labenne jeered. “ And do you think they will have time there to attend to Monsieur Bergeot ? Not a minute. When they're not in the closet they're playing musical chairs — last in takes over the Government. I have my money on Pétain, he's more used to danger than the others, poor little bed-wetters.”

Thiviers winced. Looking steadily at Labenne, he said,

“ If General Weygand is planning to stand on the Loire, Seuilly will be part of the defence. In that case, Bergeot is the right man in the right place.”

So that's where we are, Labenne thought. He paused a minute before beginning to speak in the soft voice he used in his public speeches to give greater effect to the deeper tones which vibrated like gongs and produced in his hearers the delirium of savages.

“ And you're prepared to sacrifice Seuilly ? Why ? Shall I blow up the Prefecture and the Town Hall and this house — to save time ? And my friend Marquet, who is mayor of Bordeaux — ought he to be sinking ships in the harbour and driving steam-rollers through the vines ? You must want to make quite sure that France is crushed before making terms. So that we have no choice except to become a German colony. I wonder whether future generations will think you as noble as you think yourself. Forgive me for talking in such bad taste. I'm the son of a village butcher and peasant, I don't understand the difference between good taste and suicide. Or — when you think of the lives that will be cut short — murder.”

He's taking this well, he thought, looking at Thiviers.

Thiviers stood up and walked to the window, where he could see the garden, and the tree which, he believed, had been planted by Balzac. Attributed to Balzac. A jet of water glittered against the sunlight, the birds quarrelling under it babbled like children.

“ I suppose it's foolish to think we might go on.”

Labenne let his voice rise with his anger. "If murder as a point of honour is foolish. As a simple Frenchman, I should call it wicked."

"And if the soldiers decide that Seuilly is to be defended——?"

"Do you mean Piriac?"

"Certainly not."

Labenne decided to strike brutally.

"If such orders are given, your duty is as clear as mine. We must try to make them impossible to carry out. Piriac is not one of your implacable politicians, he's an old soldier, that is, he hates bloodshed: the sight of women and children being killed in the streets by German guns, an air raid or two, the hospital bombed, will finish him. He'll surrender the town — whatever his orders. I know him. Our duty is to see that Bergeot is discredited before he can empty the hospital and send away children and mothers. Seuilly must be made more, not less vulnerable."

He paused after this last terrible sentence, to see whether Thiviers could swallow any more or if he must have a rest. The look of mingled embarrassment and stupor on the banker's face amused him. You'd think I'd invited him to take his mother to our slaughter-house. The image gave him fresh energy. "Do you want to save the town, or watch it bleed to death? You can choose, you know."

"You're asking me to behave treacherously . . ." Thiviers said.

Labenne's contempt almost choked him. He spoke in his pleasantest voice. "You can decide for yourself where the treachery comes in. Who is betraying Seuilly? Prudent men who want to save it from the fate of Arras — they say it's still burning — or an ambitious prefect who wants to burn it for his own glory? And if that were all, we might, if we were cowards, let him sacrifice it. But do you know what his future plans are? He intends to go into politics and become head of a communist government — confiscate money, property, everything. If you think it's not possible, remember what happened in Russia when the country was exhausted by a war it was losing. All this affects you more than me." He grinned. "I can always dig."

"But do you think he has any chance——?"

Labenne pushed with fierce gestures at the shirt he had worked loose during his speech. "The best in the world,"

he said. And now, he thought drily, ask me to prove it.

Thiviers was silent. His face paled still more, to show all the marks of his inner travail. An acute eye — he was sitting close to the most deadly ambush in Seuilly — could follow exactly the movements of his heart between fear and honesty, between prudence and a vestige of courage. He looked round the room, then fixed his glance on the bust of Corneille, to whom, by a supreme effort, he was trying to attribute avarice and bad faith.

"And you believe that the prudent thing——" he began.

"Is to assassinate Monsieur Bergeot," Labenne said energetically, "before he can stab us. I speak metaphorically. What I propose is to prepare a statement for the press — that is, the *New Order* — and have handbills printed showing him up as a self-styled patriot who has a fortune abroad——" he saw the movement Thiviers controlled at once. "As well as the story of Madame Prefect's flourishing little business selling places and honours. From the Prefecture! . . . Ah, I see you didn't know about that. My dear fellow, any woman who plays at politics is unscrupulous — women see through the game too easily — but Madame de Freppel can give points to her friend the Vayrac woman, who only runs brothels."

Thiviers made a gesture of disgust. "As you like," he murmured.

"But — before we go to these extremes — we must try to use Piriac. I have a weakness for acting through other people. And could you have a nobler screen?"

He smiled affably at his joke. Thiviers, he could see, was prostrated by his anxiety. I'll leave him to recover, he thought.

He went home. On the way he caught sight of Bergeot himself, walking with Colonel Rienne. They were in front of him, and they turned down a street leading to the hospital. Which of them, he wondered, will be the first to realise that the other is suspect, and drop him? It won't save either.

He found his wife crying. She had been listening to the radio, and was distraught. She begged him to let her take the children to a relative at Bayonne, to be near a frontier.

"Windy, are you?" he said unkindly. "When I decide what to do with the children, I'll tell you. But you'll stay here in any case."

He had been turning the problem in his mind for several

days. At one moment he considered sending them to Spain or even America, but he could not bring himself to place his dearest property so far out of his sight. During the morning he decided to send them to Thouédun, to the château. He would send two servants with them, with orders to take them into the cellars under the courtyard at the first sound of firing or bombs. He announced his decision at lunch. Henry looked at him blackly.

"Let me stay with you. I can look after you when the Germans come."

"You'll do as you're told, you young sinner." He hid his delight in the boy's anxiety for him.

His wife gave him an imploring look. She was afraid it would provoke him to one of his fits of sour rage. But I shall die if I stay here, she thought. Terror gave her the spirit to say,

"Their mother ought to be with them."

"And a wife's duty to be with her husband?" Labenne said.

He behaves to me, she thought, as if he were still a peasant. He's a brute, though not to his children. Why hasn't he any kindness for me, I'm certain there isn't any other woman? . . . She sighed. She had enough shrewdness to know that her husband regarded her as the implement he had used to plant his family. Once planted, only the family was important. He was keeping her with him out of indifference. Without hope, resigning herself, she thought: He's the master, it will be his fault if I'm killed.

Chapter 57

THE secretary of the hospital had telephoned Rienne that morning that a patient was anxious to see him, and if possible, that is, if Colonel Rienne could persuade him to come, the Prefect.

Mathieu had been brought into the hospital during the night. He was unconscious; one leg was broken, his back was still bleeding where the flesh had been laid open, most

of his ribs were fractured. When he could answer a question, he said that three men he did not know had called on him at eleven o'clock ; without speaking — their faces were disguised by a muffler drawn up to the eyes — they threw him down and began beating him. Thinking of the shock it would be to his old landlady, he asked them to finish the job outside the house ; and with a complaisance which would have been out-of-the-way if there were any accounting for the impulses of human beings, of even inhuman human beings, they took him into the dark little street and there handled him until he fainted. A neighbour coming home at midnight fell over him and fetched the police.

His head was uninjured. It lay on the pillow as if attached to his body by a splint. Rienne had the impression that it was the only part of him he allowed to feel. The rest, his torn body, had been silenced : it suffered and he refused to listen to it. Let it keep its vulgar pains to itself. He was not even willing to talk about his accident — he called it an accident, and Rienne saw that he was as little surprised as a soldier who has been wounded. You place yourself or are placed in front of the enemy. Naturally he tries to kill you. "Have you an enemy ?" the police had asked him. Mathieu smiled. "What do you think ? I'm a Jew."

"Didn't you recognise any of the men ?" Rienne asked.

"There was a fourth," Mathieu said. "He looked on. I thought it was Derval, but I may have been wrong. So I shall say nothing."

Rienne tried to read his thought in his eyes. They were too calm. Everything in Mathieu's mind which concerned only Mathieu had been sunk to a depth where it was out of sight. But what, thought Rienne, has he to sink ? He has no house, he has no wife or child. He can face calmly the destruction of other men's houses, and the terror and death of their children, if it becomes necessary to barricade the Republic with these frail objects. The more people suffer for the Republic, the more honourable it seems to him. As his race seems to him an honour because it has to be paid for, by derision, insults, massacre. He counts everything, even his drops of blood. How much is France worth ? Answer : Exactly as much as Frenchmen will pay for it. . . . This Jew was willing to pay limb by limb. He was not insensible, the kernel of his life was horribly sensitive ; but he had so

covered it by contempt for his own humanity that he accepted all injuries, all risks, for himself and the forty million other Frenchmen, as merely what they owed for their luck in being born French. Men were common and replaceable, France was unique. Men were cowardly, greedy, untruthful; France gave everything, endured everything, and was no more capable now of lying to the world than when she spoke to it through Rabelais and Montaigne. To keep it alive, poor short-lived Frenchmen must make a habit of dying. So Mathieu believed. His worst anxiety was rooted in a calm so severe that it resembled death, his icy inhumanity and his strength drawn from the same deep source where love of France and hate of himself were like myrrh and vinegar together.

It wasn't me he wanted to see, Rienne said to himself. Stepping back, he pushed Bergeot near the bed, so that Mathieu could talk without raising his voice. Bergeot had hesitated about coming, he only agreed to please Rienne and because he was ashamed. He hates illness, it disgusts him, Rienne thought. For the first time, Émile's egoism chilled him.

"You know that Paris has been put in a state of defence?" Mathieu murmured. "This means everything. It means that we're not going to capitulate. Yes, yes, there was a moment when I thought we were. . . . It means that every town will defend itself. What are you doing to prepare Seully for the worst?"

He means the best, Rienne thought. Even he obeys certain conventions.

Bergeot sparkled with energy and happiness. Looking with forced pity at a broken Mathieu, he reassured him. Yes, he was taking all measures. Chemists, food shops, bakers were being taken over; he had ordered the Prefecture cellars, sunk in the rock, to be equipped as an air-raid hospital; he was at last organising civil volunteers, as firemen, rescue workers. . . .

"You can give yourself up to being nursed," he said, smiling. "Try to leave the Department to me for a week or two. You can, you know."

"Don't come too close to me," Mathieu said. "I must smell very unpleasant."

"You're talking nonsense," Bergeot said, too gently.

He irritates Mathieu by his gentleness, Rienne thought.

You speak to men when they are dying in just such a weak foolish voice.

"Louis doesn't trust you," he said drily. "He doesn't understand why you allow Derval to preach defeat and panic in a rag that belongs to Labenne. I've no doubt myself that it was Derval who hired the thugs, and Labenne, even if he knew nothing about it, won't be sorry——"

"Leave me out of it," Mathieu said coldly. "Of course Derval ought to be locked up. As well as half a dozen other people who are infinitely more dangerous, and had nothing to do with last night."

"What do you want me to do?"

A film of sweat covered Mathieu's face. The effort he was making — to force from Bergeot an honesty as intransigent as his own — cost him atrocious pains. Possibly only his body knew it.

"I believe it's useless to defend Seuilly," he said in a low voice. "The retreat won't be stopped now. The disintegration, of the army and the civil administration, has gone too far. . . ." He became almost un audible. "I'm beginning to believe that the Île de France is the key. When once we've dropped it, and when *they* have picked it up, they can go anywhere, they can roll their tanks through the Beauce, over the young wheat . . . over our grapes. . . ." He stopped, realising that he had begun to talk to himself, and made another effort to pass off on Bergeot his own contempt for half-measures. "You must act *as though* Seuilly were going to be defended. . . . Is there still a chance?"

"Yes," Rienne said.

"Don't count on it," Mathieu said anxiously to Bergeot. "You could be disappointed, and — you are not the type to profit by disappointments, they unnerve you. But listen what you must do. You must get out of the way the men who will employ fear and mistrust against you. You can suspend Labenne, and you must re-arrest Derval. . . . If, I say if, the town is defended, and it is all useless — I'm nearly certain it will be — it's still something for the future to copy. . . ." His face softened a little. "You can't imagine," he murmured, "how closely that little idiot of a future sticks to her models. And how she needs them."

He waited, looking at Bergeot.

"If you'll identify Derval——" Bergeot said, hesitating.

"I can't."

"Then——"

"You'll have to arrest him for a polite form of treason. Not attempted murder. I don't want revenge."

"You're a brave man," the Prefect said.

"So you won't do anything . . . ?"

"Can't you leave our handful of defeatists to me?" Bergeot cried. "I'll take care they don't do any harm."

Mathieu turned his head away, as far as he could, little more than half an inch. He said nothing. Rienne saw that he was looking for the profit in a brutal disappointment — not his own, but attached in some way to his sense of order, authority, the nation. He touched Émile's arm.

"Are you telling Louis the truth?" he asked curtly.

Bergeot looked from one to the other with a quite joyous frankness. "I'm not surprised you don't believe me," he said. "I've made as many mistakes as anyone in my position could make and survive. I flatter people, usually the wrong people, because I'm afraid of being disliked. I need approval, you know. You both know. It's my nature to flatter people. But in real life I try extremely hard to be honest. I promise — you're both witnesses — that I'll shut up anyone, no matter who he is, who might be troublesome in a crisis. You have my word. And let me tell you that no one will interfere with me. The Minister won't. In any case, he's too busy. . . ."

"So you think this isn't the crisis?" Mathieu said, without opening his eyes. "You really think you can go on playing at politics with men who are playing it for their lives and fortunes? You're wrong."

But Rienne was almost reassured. This was again the Émile he knew, clear-sighted, selfish, capable of any levity and any sacrifice. His little body was a battle-ground of faults — vanity, ambition, self-indulgence, genius — the greatest of faults, and which pardons the others. Never had he felt closer to his foster-brother — or more afraid for him. It must be the weight of his energy which was hollowing his shoulders and dragging down the lines of his face when he was not smiling or talking. He looked old. . . .

During the rest of the day Rienne was too busy to think over the news. Towards ten o'clock he left the barracks and sauntered along the Quai d'Angers. The heat was stifling, what he had first thought were guns turned out to be thunder. A pyramid of clouds blocked the sunset. Rain began falling,

the first for weeks. During the time when cloudless days favoured the Germans in their race across French roads and fields, not a cloud but dispersed in a few seconds, leaving the ground firm for the tanks. Now that pitiful hordes of civilians shared the ditches with soldiers, rain fell on them like shrapnel. What could you make of it if, as Rienne did, you believed that God needs the French more than He needs other nations?

The first drops fell with the flat sound of metal on the wall under his hand. In his sober way he was picturing the defence of Paris. What the world would lose, if it were destroyed, was not calculable. If it lost the bridges and the Sainte-Chapelle, if it lost the Arc de Triomphe, the rue St-Jacques, and the lovely line of the quays, if it lost the cathedral moored in the Seine with its ballast of how many centuries, and if it lost the houses of the other more modest island. If it lost the gardens, palaces, monuments. And Paris itself a monument. And Paris itself carrying the past. There would be left only what poets of all nations and centuries had written about it, and painters recorded. And an example like a few, a very few, in the past. The whole world, if Paris were destroyed, would know that France was imperishable. The French would know it. On the Loire or on the Garonne or on the Dordogne or on the Lot, they would defend the Seine, they would defend a memory and the future.

The rain now was torrential. Standing there in the darkness, he did not notice it until he had been soaked to the skin.

Chapter 58

THIS same evening Marguerite waited for Bergeot to come, as she had waited the past four nights, expecting a message that he was going to stay at the Prefecture. Even she hesitated to go back there at nine or ten o'clock to remonstrate. She would scold on the telephone, but very often his secretary brought a letter and explained — the real object of his visit — that the Prefect had been forced to ask the exchange not

"Then——"

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to put through any calls before eight the next morning. She had lost the impudence to argue her way through this barrier.

She had lost, she was beginning to realise, much of her self-confidence. It seemed that an impulse to change your life destroyed your energy without placing any new weapons in your hand. I'm growing old, she said to herself, not better, but older. Was it age that kept her from visiting her friend Léonie, or an instinct warning her that she would not be able to deliver herself from any temptation she met there? Age or a shapeless fear that pushed her to pray now and then, shamefaced, behind a locked door? She sat in her room thinking about a future when she and Émile would be secure, with no need to oblige anyone. Her thoughts were as vague as the Loire, ripples starting from a sandy island to die in mid-stream without touching either bank. As she had longed for excitement, money, power, she longed for goodness — but what was behind her longing? Nothing. Not a fever of flesh and spirit, not the hunger of her fingers clinging painfully to ledge after ledge of her climb.

She avoided thinking about her daughter. It was easy, seeing her every day, to feel a thin security. It blew away the instant she tried to touch Catherine's mind, which eluded her as easily as her heart. The girl, all smiles and amiability for her mother, was as distant as an eagle. It would be as much use trying to tame her. Better not think about her. Better avoid rousing this new anguish she felt when she remembered the tears a child had wept because she was being sent away, and was so unlikely to weep now that the mother reproached herself as if for a great crime that her daughter had learned to be self-possessed. She suffered if she let herself think: I neglected her. Better think about a child she had never neglected, because he was not born yet. . . .

Bergeot came in. He was tired and smiling. He told her, as if it were the most remarkable of his news, a miracle, that it was raining, and then that the Germans had crossed the Marne at three places. Evidently you could not expect two miracles in the same day.

"I know," Marguerite said. "Well?"

He sat down and leaned his head on her shoulder. "How cool you feel. I'm so thankful to be with you, my love."

"What have you been doing?"

"What do you think? Working." With his familiar

nervous gaiety, trying to startle her, he said he was preparing to arrest Thiviers, Labenne, "even Ernest Huet if he pushes his rat's nose in here. He's in Tours now, pestering Ministers to let him spoil something, if it's only a piece of official paper."

"Are you mad?"

"Not in the least. Paris is going to be defended. That means Orléans, Dijon, Le Mans, will be defended. And Seuilly. I think you and Catherine had better move tomorrow, to the Hôtel Buran. An isolated house isn't safe. And I can see you more easily there."

Marguerite did not answer at once. The shock had reawakened all her energies. It was her future happiness, her future honesty, that were at stake. To save them, she would pretend to anything now, tell without a qualm as many lies as were needed. Or her infant qualms were inaudible, they had been smothered by her coaxing hands and voice, which were playing parts they knew too well to need prompting. So with her terrible will, which fastened itself ruthlessly on what she wanted.

"Have you seen Piriac?" she asked mildly.

"Yes. Yesterday morning."

"What did he tell you? Is the Army falling back here? Has he had orders—?" She broke off, not wanting to tell him she had spoken to Thiviers. "Are you sure that Piriac knows what he's talking about? He's senile, you know. Would they have left him in charge here if they had had any intention of defending the Loire?"

"Why not? He wouldn't be in charge of the defence, he would be subordinate to the divisional general. No, no, the point is that he encouraged me to go on. And he's not gloomy, he doesn't think we're going to be defeated."

He is putting his own ideas into Piriac's mouth, she thought. She had caught the over-emphasis in his voice, and knew he was boasting. She smiled. It was an effort. For the first time, her body was protesting a little against going through its tricks.

"You don't usually rely on General Piriac."

"I rely on myself," Bergeot retorted. "I knew there were no Ernest Huets among our real leaders. They understand that the Germans mean to finish us this time. Even if it ruins us, we're forced to fight."

"Of course it will ruin us."

Bergeot shrugged his shoulders. "I would rather be dead than take orders from a German lieutenant. They do so enjoy giving them."

"And you'd rather I were dead——"

"Hush," he said. "Decent people don't say these things."

"I'm not decent. I love you and I want us to live."

He put his arms round her, and she felt the weight of his body becoming part of hers, as in sleep. She tried to think coolly. Surely something she could say would move him from his maddening self-confidence? Her thoughts were terribly disordered; an old actress, deserted by her cunning, would feel the same weakness and despair.

"Don't talk nonsense," Bergeot said, "you're not a coward. Besides, it's not in my hands, I'm an official, a Government servant."

"You don't know whether peace terms are being discussed. They must be — or you would have had special orders."

"It wouldn't make any difference. If — I don't believe it — but if we're going to make peace, I shall have to make other plans . . . to carry on here. . . ."

"By then you will have been ruined. Thiviers and Labenne will have ruined you."

He pushed her gently away from him, to be able to see her. "What are you talking about, Marguerite?"

She felt stupid with fear. Something she could not control was happening to her, her ears sang, she imagined that she was being drawn into a black whirlpool. It was not unpleasant — a little alarming. It was the first time in her life that she had fainted, and it lasted less than a minute. When she recovered she was lying uncomfortably on the floor; Émile, who had lost his head completely, was gripping her by her shoulders. The circle of light round her widened slowly to include what they had been talking about before she fainted. Smiling, and closing her eyes to enjoy another minute of freedom and irresponsibility, she said,

"You are killing me."

Chapter 59

LABENNE had no intention of exposing himself. So far as he could, he never showed himself in a political intrigue until the moment when he could step forward to take the place he had all along had in view. He made others move for him. If by their incompetence, or by developing scruples, they sometimes ruined everything, he began again patiently with other tools. And without throwing away the first. In another emergency they might come in useful; he blamed himself for having picked them up at the wrong time. Unlike his enemy, Mathieu, he despised all human beings except himself—in himself were included his children. He had not yet reached, perhaps never would, a stage of remorse for his lack of public morals. He had so many private ones, and he had been spared any impulse to disinterest and any movement of his intelligence which did not return instantly to its point of departure—himself. Moving as cautiously as he did, he had no suspicion that he was leaving a wake which the future would notice. Had he still a touch of the innocence which makes a child indignant when it is discovered sitting quietly in its chair and punished for the mischief it did on its way? . . . There was no question that the butcher's little boy had every right to think he had done the best he could with his talents. What are talents for unless to advance their owner? And he was advancing! Only five years ago, would General Piriac have sent for him to ask advice? Certainly not. It amused him that M. de Thiviers had been sent for as well. I shall see which sounds the hollower when I knock them together, he said to himself.

Piriac was standing when they came into his room. For less than a moment, Labenne was awed by the old general's severe self-assurance. With that air he must have sent thousands of poor devils to be killed, he thought; for noble inhumanity you can't beat these old soldiers.

He escaped from his moment of awe by pretending that Piriac was his village schoolmaster, grown very old. . . . Good-morning, Monsieur Eustache-Anne Piriac! As you see, I'm not a child any longer, and I'm glad that you treat

Bergeot shrugged his shoulders. "I would rather be dead than take orders from a German lieutenant. They do so enjoy giving them."

"And you'd rather I were dead——"

"Hush," he said. "Decent people don't say these things."

"I'm not decent. I love you and I want us to live."

He put his arms round her, and she felt the weight of his body becoming part of hers, as in sleep. She tried to think coolly. Surely something she could say would move him from his maddening self-confidence? Her thoughts were terribly disordered; an old actress, deserted by her cunning, would feel the same weakness and despair.

"Don't talk nonsense," Bergeot said, "you're not a coward. Besides, it's not in my hands, I'm an official, a Government servant."

"You don't know whether peace terms are being discussed. They must be — or you would have had special orders."

"It wouldn't make any difference. If — I don't believe it — but if we're going to make peace, I shall have to make other plans . . . to carry on here. . . ."

"By then you will have been ruined. Thiviers and Labenne will have ruined you."

He pushed her gently away from him, to be able to see her. "What are you talking about, Marguerite?"

She felt stupid with fear. Something she could not control was happening to her, her ears sang, she imagined that she was being drawn into a black whirlpool. It was not unpleasant — a little alarming. It was the first time in her life that she had fainted, and it lasted less than a minute. When she recovered she was lying uncomfortably on the floor; Émile, who had lost his head completely, was gripping her by her shoulders. The circle of light round her widened slowly to include what they had been talking about before she fainted. Smiling, and closing her eyes to enjoy another minute of freedom and irresponsibility, she said,

"You are killing me."

Chapter 59

LADENNE had no intention of exposing himself. So far as he could, he never showed himself in a political intrigue until the moment when he could step forward to take the place he had all along had in view. He made others move for him. If by their incompetence, or by developing scruples, they sometimes ruined everything, he began again patiently with other tools. And without throwing away the first. In another emergency they might come in useful ; he blamed himself for having picked them up at the wrong time. Unlike his enemy, Mathieu, he despised all human beings except himself—in himself were included his children. He had not yet reached, perhaps never would, a stage of remorse for his lack of public morals. He had so many private ones, and he had been spared any impulse to disinterest and any movement of his intelligence which did not return instantly to its point of departure — himself. Moving as cautiously as he did, he had no suspicion that he was leaving a wake which the future would notice. Had he still a touch of the innocence which makes a child indignant when it is discovered sitting quietly in its chair and punished for the mischief it did on its way ? . . . There was no question that the butcher's little boy had every right to think he had done the best he could with his talents. What are talents for unless to advance their owner ? And he was advancing ! Only five years ago, would General Piriac have sent for him to ask advice ? Certainly not. It amused him that M. de Thiviers had been sent for as well. I shall see which sounds the hollower when I knock them together, he said to himself.

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me differently. . . . Fastened to the wall behind the general's shoulder was the small wooden statue of Joan of Arc presented to him by the newly-formed League. Labenne walked across to look at it. He had his back to Piriac and could speak frankly. You and I, my girl, he said, are both peasants, but you didn't understand politics; it cost you your life. He turned round.

"You have a fine thing here, General."

Piriac's face softened. "She was a good child, honest, ignorant—a true child of the people before they were spoiled." He laughed, almost silently. "She was shrewd, you know, no one could beat her in an argument, she was tough and she had faith—all the virtues of the old France. We must revive them."

He seemed certain that they had died.

Labenne made a solemn face. Faith? he said to himself. Honesty? My dear headmaster, do you know the meaning of these words you're teaching us? Do you believe they will help you against the Germans when they arrive to take over Seuilly? As for shrewdness, I am the shrewdest person here, and I should certainly have let our saint burn; she was too much of a good thing.

He watched Piriac settling himself, with Thiviers's help, in his chair. . . . What does he believe? . . . Behind the passivity of Piriac's face he saw the stirrings of a childish, that is, an immeasurable vanity. . . . He believes that he will survive as a saint. . . .

"Gentlemen," said Piriac in a slow voice, "I've sent for you to report on the feeling in the town. I have the Prefect's reports. I should like yours."

"I hope you don't mistrust Monsieur Bergeot," Labenne said.

"I wish to inform myself as fully as possible," Piriac said calmly.

Labenne looked at him with admiration. Old fox, he thought. "There's a good deal of uneasiness. What can you expect—with all these precautions and volunteers and the rest?"

Thiviers crossed and uncrossed his hands. "People are saying that you can't guarantee the town's safety. They're grumbling already about doing the soldiers' work for them."

That argument won't impress him, Labenne said to him-

self. "Our people always grumble," he said drily. "What is far more significant is yesterday's meeting."

"What meeting?"

What in fact it had been was a meeting of small vine-growers to protest against the import of Algerian wines, and market gardeners infuriated by the town charges, with a few retired civil servants who were being driven to suicide by the cut in their pensions and rising prices. In Labenne's mouth their protests in the name of simple despair or greed became cries of revolt. All these bolsheviks in shabby morning-coats or straw hats and blouses would begin cutting throats the moment their leader, Monsieur Bergeot, gave the sign. . . . Labenne knew he was safe. His listeners knew nothing about peasants and clerks who were nearly all the sons of peasants; they would believe anything, even accepting, as proof of a bad motive, the speech made by the old postman who said, "Gentlemen, I want to live; my wife also wants to live" . . . he tried to go on, but these few words had exhausted his passion and his courage. Ashamed, he sat down. . . .

"You can imagine how sinister such a meeting is," Labenne finished, "with the Germans at Compiègne, the Marne lost, and their armoured divisions pouring over the Seine at Vernon. Speaking humbly — as an ignorant layman should speak to a great soldier — I believe that revolution will break out here in a fortnight. If the war lasts so long as that. But since — as everyone foresaw — Paris is not going to be defended—"

He stopped. With as much effort as if they were paving-stones, Piriac had lifted both his hands; he let them fall. "But it would have been wicked to defend it. Think of the destruction!"

"Think," Thiviers retorted gently, "of the destruction of Seuilly if it is defended."

"Do you, sir, believe that Seuilly is defensible?" Labenne asked.

"No."

"Then——"

"I shall do my duty," the general interrupted.

How the devil, though Labenne, can you argue with a man whose mind is made up of a few levers and responses? "Even if you are only obeying orders," he said respectfully, "you will be held responsible by history. Seuilly is in your

hands. You can destroy it uselessly — since it can't be defended. Or, whatever happens, whatever orders you receive, you can save it by " — he felt for the painless word "withdrawal. I beg your pardon for giving you my opinion. I know you won't consider your reputation. I'm less noble, I shall be heartbroken if history records that on the eve of an armistice you sacrificed thousands of civilian lives and an historic city." He let his voice rise. "I'll even say : On the eve of defeat. What is defeat, what is the enemy from outside compared with the enemy lying in wait inside the house to murder us in our sleep ?"

Taking up his sublime voice Thiviers said, "In defeat will be our salvation."

Looking at Piriac, Labenne saw that he was neither offended nor distressed. "I have proof," he went on more quietly, "that the communists in Seully intend to destroy the Town Hall, the post office, and the aircraft works. Not, you notice, the Prefecture. I must honestly say that I have no proof that the Prefect — who would like you to arm these same men — knows of their plans. Possibly he's only reckless. But the danger is real."

This invention startled not only the general but M. de Thiviers. Since it described one of his nightmares, he believed it. He turned pale and implored Piriac to take steps at once. Labenne was delighted : he had not even to show himself forcing Piriac to act : Thiviers had done that for him, and the general would be responsible.

Piriac dragged himself from his chair. "Don't alarm yourself, Monsieur de Thiviers. I shall send troops to guard the Town Hall, and your factory. And there will be no civil volunteers, even unarmed. If your workers give you any trouble, you can call on the officer commanding the troops. He will have his instructions."

"Thank you," Thiviers murmured. He was pale now with relief.

"Forgive me," Labenne said, "I should like the men guarding me to be out of sight. The crypt of Ste. Marie-Madeleine has an outlet into the Town Hall cellars. They could be placed there."

"And in the underground garage near my works," Thiviers said. "The Mayor is right. We ought not to give our hot-headed Prefect a handle."

"I always mistrusted him," Piriac said simply.

"He's a fool," Labenne jeered suddenly. "Why didn't he settle down? Suppose he is turned out of the Prefecture? Where can he go? To lodge with Madame de Freppel? That's not my idea of a family."

He was sincere — for the first time since he came into the room; unconsciously, in condemning Bergeot, he made the gesture his father used to make when he refused to buy an unsound beast.

The old general nodded. He, too, despised in Bergeot the man who had not regularised his life. Immorality was distasteful to him; to avoid talking about it he said,

"The people of Seuilly are my children. They will listen to me."

"Of course," Labenne said.

One of these days, he thought, you'll discover that politics in this country is not a nursery game. What will you do then? Die — and enter the heaven of old generals, with its councils of war, dedications, and armies which can be revived after battle and killed to infinity. A delicious eternity of manœuvres.

With Thiviers, he went directly to the Prefecture. He allowed Thiviers to pass on the commander-in-chief's change of mind. Bergeot flew into a rage. For once, his humiliation is getting the better of his vanity, Labenne thought: he'll blush when we've gone, when he remembers that he let us see what he is feeling.

He was struck, too, by the pleasure Thiviers showed when he could insult Bergeot. Something here, he said to himself. I must find out. . . . No information comes amiss when your instruments are men's fears, vices, vanities.

"My good Thiviers," Bergeot said, "you're talking nonsense. I've just seen a deputation — of ordinary men — who want me to represent to General Piriac that they're willing to risk anything to defend Seuilly. They're not communists. There's no unrest in the town. No plots. As it happens, a Superintendent Rozier is waiting to see me. We'll have him in and you can question him."

The Superintendent, who had no idea when he got up that morning that he was ruined, came in. Labenne knew him. A man of forty, he amused himself by trying to grow open-air melons; it was his only weakness; he and his wife were economising savagely to educate three sons. On Labenne's private file he figured as doubtful — that is,

without a known vice, and possibly too set in his ways to become supple again.

"These gentlemen," Bergeot said to him, "want you to tell them anything you know about political unrest in Seully."

The Superintendent looked relieved. When he saw the Mayor he had expected he was going to be told off to arrange the safety of some Minister who had taken into his head to make a speech in Seully. His objection to orators was that they robbed his melons of the leisure sacred to them.

"There is none," he said.

"What do you mean?" Thiviers exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon," the Superintendent said, startled. "Perhaps I haven't understood the question."

"Do you expect any disturbances?" Bergeot said. "Are there any signs — don't omit the smallest — of trouble among the workers? Think carefully."

"But there's nothing," the Superintendent repeated. He was delighted to be able to reassure them. "Never were there so few crimes. Everything is absolutely quiet."

"Good," Labenne said, smiling.

The Superintendent caught his eye. He knew at once that he had seriously offended the powerful Mayor. Forgetting, in his terrible agitation, that Labenne professed to be a left-wing Radical, he said,

"All the Radicals and Radical Socialists have gone to the front. There's no one to make trouble."

"You've reassured us," Labenne said, with a menacing smile.

"You can go," Bergeot said.

The unfortunate man went out: he was scarcely able to move his shoulders, the Mayor's smile had gone in deeply between them.

"And there you have the truth," the Prefect said. He looked at them with triumph. "And you," he said to Labenne, "you approved my civil defence plans."

"I? Rubbish," Labenne said brutally. "Don't try to father your romantic pieties on me, I'm not guilty."

Bored now, he jumped up and went away, leaving Thiviers to finish the job. Before Bergeot could speak, Thiviers said gravely, "My poor Émile, prepare yourself for a shock."

The Prefect had reason to suspect this tone of calm

evangelical pity. He had heard it used by Thiviers to subordinate he was going to sack in disgrace.

"What is it?"

Thiviers told him in the same voice that Labenne was going to ruin Marguerite. The Mayor had documents and letters proving that for the past four years she had been selling places in the administration, "using her influence over you, my poor friend"; she had her agents in the least reputable house in Seully; her letters, most of them on official paper, were in the hands of scandalous people, including ladies of the town. "I've seen these letters in Labenne's hands, and though I don't know how he got them, I can assure you they're genuine. I know her writing."

He waited. Bergeot was silent. Stunned, he felt that he had always known about Marguerite's activities, had known that she did not, as he had pretended, interest herself in the administration only to enjoy the sense of being a privileged person. He had known and refused to know — as, with all the evidence under her eye, a mother will deny that her son is a liar and thief. His tenderness for her had joined with a sort of cowardice — was he afraid that if he knew too much his "marriage" with the Comtesse de Freppel would turn out to be something less exalted? — to shut his eyes. But he had suspected. Without asking Thiviers to produce any evidence, he believed all he was told — that she had disgraced herself, and him with her. Why? She wanted money, he said to himself. It was such a mean ambition that his heart ached. My poor girl, he thought, how little I've been able to do for you.

"What is Labenne going to do?" he said at last.

"You can buy him off."

"I thought so," Bergeot interrupted. He could not resist a sarcasm he knew he would pay for. "Why are you acting for him? Do you draw a commission?"

"My dear Émile, you're suffering," Thiviers said. He went on to explain, with as many phrases as he hoped would fatigue Bergeot before he need say anything openly disagreeable or disloyal, that Labenne only wanted a little non-intervention — a trick which could be attributed to any number of highly respectable statesmen. If Edgar Vayrac's friends were able to arrange for his provisional release — he leaned on the word provisional, as though in itself it were an attribution of good faith — would the Prefect use his

influence to see that the local press did not make a bad use of this merciful act ?

" You mean," Bergeot said, " will I approve the setting free of a spy, and will I silence the editor of the *Journal* — who has already been silenced, I don't know for how long, by brutes your friend Derval could tell you about."

Thiviers said calmly, " Don't go too far."

In fact, Bergeot had alarmed himself by the reckless way he was accusing the man he had always thought of as his protector. He made a blind turn.

" In any case," he said in a conciliatory voice, " I can't guarantee anything. I did my best for you over Derval, but I believe Colonel Rienne has designs on him."

As soon as he had said this, he was ashamed. He knew that he had given Rienne away to an enemy. What possessed me ? he thought, horrified. He did not recognise as his the instinct which had snatched up his foster-brother as the easiest sacrifice. What am I ? he asked himself. What is wrong with me ? I have ten times Bonamy's intelligence, but if it was to save his life he would not give me away.

Thiviers had risen. Satisfied that the man in front of him was broken, he wanted to avoid looking at the dead body. It embarrassed him. He tried to revive it by his warmth when he shook hands, hoping to reconcile in himself the two sides of his nature, piety and avarice, attachment to the past and hate, dread, of the future. He was disconcerted to feel Bergeot's hand resting in his as though it were really lifeless : he dropped it quickly.

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Looking into the shabby café at the foot of the Prefecture hill, Labenne saw a group of elderly men, the deputation Bergeot had talked about. He went in and spoke to them. They all knew him by sight, and admired him. If a newcomer to Seuilly asked sceptically about the Mayor's wealth, they would not pretend that he had made it all honestly : but the money, they would say, was honestly there, no mistake about it, and the Mayor was a warm man, a good family man, no scandal in that side of his life. . . . They made room for him at the table. He threw himself, with an air of friendliness and naïveté, into the argument — all of them being slightly drunk, they were talking politics. It did not deceive Labenne that half these sober heads of families

were upholding extreme doctrines. He knew they were only enjoying the logical use of their minds. What they were arguing had nothing to do with their living faith, which attached them to a field, a small vineyard, the round loaves they fetched home when they were children and now saw their children fetching, a shabby schoolhouse, a café like this one, a Café Moderne, a Café de la Poste, a Café de la Ville et de l'Univers. He made no attempt to force his opinions on them. His voice, clear and sly, held them when he chose to speak, but he was careful not to abuse it. It was not he who began talking about the Prefect; he only asked innocently what they were doing here together, and smiled broadly when he was told.

"Ah, a fine man, our Prefect," he said affably, "a pity he lets himself be led by the nose by a Countess." He laughed. "But that's my jealousy. I don't know any Countesses myself, I shouldn't know how to talk to them. Between you and me, I'm not going to try. Let those climb who want to, I'm not a confessor, I don't judge consciences."

He had stirred in them their ferocious respect for the family, which their quarrels over politics never touched. Leaning back, he let them talk themselves into a serious passion, only putting in a word when it would turn the argument against Bergeot. At the end of half an hour, of their own accord entirely, they were criticising the Prefect — he was ambitious, a social climber, a good man spoiled by the company he kept. Labenne interrupted with a sudden sharpness.

"There's one man in Seully who is above suspicion. It's not me, it's not the Prefect, and it's not you, Gaston, you old villain! I mean General Piriac."

They applauded as if they were at an election meeting, and Gaston simpered roguishly. Labenne leaned forward.

"Why is he against the Prefect?" he asked.

"Is he?" exclaimed Gaston.

"Look!" Labenne pointed to the street, where a couple of soldiers were tearing down the Prefect's notices from trees and house walls, prising them loose with bayonets and throwing the pieces into a mule-cart.

He got up and left them gaping at one another. So much for their promises to our brave Prefect, he thought ironically. He had enjoyed himself: the use of his power to move men

gave him a pleasure as sensuous as a good meal, and far sharper than anything a woman could give him. From his happiness — and his contempt for Thiviers — sprang the second impulse of pity he felt for Bergeot. At this moment, and for a moment, he would have saved him. If Bergeot had asked him for help.

Chapter 60

RIENNE was waiting in an ante-room of the hospital to see Mathieu. The room, small, dark, was crowded with relatives ; he listened to phrases crawling like maggots into an air heavy with the smells of fear and poverty and curdled by the heat. The rain of the night before last had peeled off some of the spongy pressure and left a sun as hard as a flint. There was only one window in the room, it was shuttered ; the light creeping in was already feverish. Rienne kept his head down and listened. In the ignorance and ignorant apathy of the first months of the war, news of disaster had broken like an abscess. There were elderly men in the room who had been soldiers. When they said, " They're across the Marne," when they said, " Châlons has been taken," they saw precise images where the others, men who were too old, and the women, saw through the shutters only a sky white with fear. All their images were images of anger, they did not understand, but they were angry. . . . " I don't bother my head with politics " . . . " Reynaud ? Oh, I daresay he's paid for it like the others, I should like a squint at his bankbook " . . . " We've had too much, my man was killed in February '16, and now my two sons and my son-in-law are up there " . . . " Didn't we lose a million and a half of ours, not counting the cripples, and they ask us to begin again ? " . . . " We've paid out too often " . . . " This time, I said to him, you won't come back ; two wars, it's the end. " . . . A workman looked at his hands and said under his breath, but audibly, " Is it worth going on with ? For the kind of Republic we pay for ? " . . . " They make us pay for the time they waste in Paris, and their women " . . . " Of course we pay " . . . " Better go on fighting than let

the Boches in " . . . " Always and always their wars " . . . " Better no politicians — with their mean tricks." . . . Rienne wondered whether they would listen to him if he said : The Republic you've begun to abuse isn't simply an affair of bribes and tricks, it was once the daily bread of a people satisfied to be anonymous. Except that they were Frenchmen. If you have let all that wither, what have you in the ground to take its place ? . . . Some of them would smile ironically, and the others . . . there are only women and old men here, and children.

His name was called, he had to come out of his corner and push his way to the door in a sudden silence. They're not certain I can be trusted, he thought.

Mathieu wanted him to try to get the prisoners at Geulin released. All, not only one of them. He had forced himself to sink his friend's chance in the rest. There was no time now for a weakness. He had begun to be certain that the Germans would reach Seuilly — and find, only six miles away, some hundreds of their countrymen and nearest enemies. It was scarcely likely they would miss this chance to prove their fitness to have enemies.

" These men must be released. You must interest Piriac. — I know I'm asking you to move an immovable body — "

" Why have you given up hope ? "

Mathieu moved his head. He had not given up hope for the future. It was in the present that he felt the advance of violence. And especially for his race. Especially for Jews. He could not be mistaken. The atmosphere in these days was too clear. He had, of course, the obsession with death which springs too quickly in the memory of his people, even in the young, fastened even to the youngest bones. Why, since we all die ? But the Jews have to face death in its least bearable shape, the cruelty of human beings. It is its human face which makes cruelty terrible and unbearable. Mathieu had a clarity, a purity of despair ; it took from him the veils that others, even of his race — who would like to be able to sacrifice a few of their own for the sake of peace (like every other people) — could stretch in front of their eyes. His memory, his instincts, his old alliance with history, warned him that the new time of sorrow would be darker than any in the past. They had often enough been afraid, but the fear to come would crush their entrails with a stone. It was

perhaps the end. A people which carries so much death must one day be tired.

Mathieu himself was not much afraid. He had almost killed his fear, as he would kill his death, by despising it. He was not immune against suffering, but he had managed to sever the nerves joining it to his past; he did not seek his mother in dreams, or dream that he was a child. He suffered as an adult, with ears and eyes open — fortunately a very rare gift.

"I'll do what I can," Rienne said. "Tell me how you feel."

"I'm going home tomorrow morning."

"What! You're not fit."

"At my own risk. My right leg is in plaster, and my ribs. With crutches, I can move about in my room, and keep an eye on the war. At the rate it's moving — if I don't keep at least an eye on it—"

He smiled. It was certainly against his will that his smile gave away so much rage and grief, and without moving his lips.

Rienne left him. Part of the hospital was now filled by soldiers evacuated from a town on the Marne. As he passed the corridor leading to it, a male nurse beckoned him. He turned back. A doctor wanted help with a German prisoner who seemed to be partly off his head. If the Colonel would speak to him as an officer. . . . There was a screen round the prisoner's bed. He was very young, and already grey in the face. His eyes open and quite lucid, he was lying quietly. Rienne spoke to him in poor German. The boy answered his questions calmly. He was nineteen, he was from Rüge in East Prussia. . . . "Rüge?" . . . "It's my village," the young German said softly. . . . One of the orderlies took hold of his arm and the other moved forward the apparatus for the blood transfusion. Instantly the boy flung himself into a paroxysm; he wept, stammering: "No French Jewish blood," he cried, "no tainted blood" . . . "Do you want us to let you die?" Rienne said severely. Yes, he would far sooner die. To live — with diseased blood — he would kill himself afterwards. . . . Rienne felt repulsion and pity. He's possessed, he said to himself; it's too late to save him. He advised the doctor to let him die: the doctor, an old man, worn out, agreed without interest. Rienne was left alone with the German.

"You realise that you'll die?" he said gently. "Of course," the boy answered. He was a good child again, modest, simple: he had the hands of a peasant. "Will you write for me to my father?" he asked timidly. . . . "If you like." . . . "Tell him I was quite happy, that I thought of our house and the pond . . ."

At the other end of the ward near the door a French soldier lying on his back was muttering about tanks. Delirious, his eyes full of light and terror, he was holding a naked arm over his head to guard himself against the tank he saw rolling on him. He, too, was very young. We are all doing our best to wipe out the disgrace of youth, Rienne thought.

General Piriac listened to him with disapproval. In his opinion, the men interned at Geulin were responsible — not alone, but wilfully — for dragging a peaceful France into war. They were against peace, and against the head of their own country; they were bad Germans.

"They were against Hitler," Rienne said.

"Your conclusion is false," Piriac said coldly. As always, anger gave him a new energy: when he was in a rage, he was almost alive. "I don't choose to have anything to do with bad citizens. In any case, it was the civilian authorities who found them undesirable. You can consult the Mayor. Not the Prefect, I don't trust him. If the Mayor wants to get them moved I shan't object."

Rienne had to see his immediate chief. General Ligny was lying in bed in his own room, after a heart attack — in the worst taste, he told Rienne. To be old and to die of heart trouble during a war — contemptible! He kept Rienne with him every day for three or four hours, as the only person on the staff who was not stupid and would not bore him to death. "I prefer," he said, "to die in my own way."

"One reason, my dear Rienne, why I like you so much is that General Woerth doesn't."

"But you can't say he's stupid," Rienne said, smiling.

Ligny's face was suddenly distorted by anger. It was the first time he had given way to an undisciplined emotion, he must really be ill.

"No. But I detest him. Do you know he has intrigued against me since we were young officers? But for him I

might have been at G.H.Q. And if I were there, I should fight. . . ." He recovered himself and spoke calmly. "No, no, it's too late for me. I shouldn't fight now."

"Why not, sir?"

Ligny closed his eyes; when they disappeared, you saw that they were the seat of his irony. The rest of his face was purely delicate and gentle.

"War has become too appalling," he murmured. "For young men to sacrifice themselves, that's bad enough — and bearable, because so many of them die without fear, which is the only way of overcoming physical death. But the air-raids on villages, the women and children dying — no nation could have let that loose except one which has become purely a State. A thing. If the Germans had not become eyeless and mindless, they would have looked at their future and been turned to stone."

"So the civilised peoples must give way to the barbarians," Rienne said, "and the gross Nazi body kill our French mind? After it has killed its own," he added, thinking of the dying boy. "Or do you believe that in two or five hundred years they will have become civilised only by living in France?"

He imagined a German taking over his house at Thoudun and giving himself up to the old walls. His ears when he sat in the garden would be brushed by words from the past, he would eat Agathe's herbs, and when death caught up with him in a French bed it would loose on him all the spectres of a French death, as a French childhood would spring out on his children when they knocked themselves against the edge of the loft stairs.

Ligny said slowly, "No. It's simply that I'm too old."

"Too civilised."

"You're a worse pessimist than I am," the general said. He smiled and opened his eyes, sparkling with malice. "If our civilisation is really alive, it will defeat the barbarians. No civilisation is ever murdered. They die, these precious civilisations, only their own deaths. If there is a barbarian at the funeral, he is there to tread down the earth."

"Why do you call the Germans barbarians?" Rienne asked. "You don't hate them."

"No. I only hate my fellow Christians. I hate Woerth. . . . The Germans have never been christianised. One summer, when I went to Swinemünde to look at the Baltic, I

saw battalions of male and female Germans drawn up almost naked. The sight of that butcher's shop of blond bodies, adoring the sun, revolted me ; I realised why the Germans are unlike every other Western people. Their religion is pre-Christian, they have a purely irrational feeling for nature. All that nonsense of theirs about blood — as if a German body were the Holy Grail — is obviously the religion of a savage. Or else they degrade nature by stifling his own in a child. They even refuse him his own death — a good German must always die for the State. What a degradation ! Yet I wonder — can any German, the most fanatical, when he is dying—” He stopped. “ But what do I understand about fanaticism ? ” he said, smiling. “ I am a Frenchman. . . . These poor little Boches have no sense of what is possible, they believe they're behaving heroically when they stretch their energy until it snaps. In four centuries — I give them the benefit of the Middle Ages, when all the same we found time to bring our language to a point where it could be used by a Joinville and a Villon ; going back only to the beginning of the sixteenth, when we sprang Rabelais on the world — they haven't guessed that a people is not civilised until it learns what can be done by minds and bodies without straining them. Heavens, how they exaggerate ! I still shudder at those large nude bodies, modelled on heaven knows what mediaeval savage, and all that indecent enthusiasm. I wanted to wring its neck. And how I wanted a human being, and a little criticism, if it was only of the weather — which was perfect. If the French really are dying, if the universe prefers the Germans to us, it must be losing its taste. Fancy preferring a world of egoism and greed to a world of order, simplicity, happiness. . . . Yes, yes, I know — we are egoists. But only because we are interested — we're not greedy.”

“ We don't worship war,” Rienne said.

“ We're afraid of it. We know what it costs. Fortunately, the most eager soldiers are not the best.”

Ligny had exhausted himself. Rienne would have left him, but the general sprang on him the question he had hoped to escape.

“ Are we preparing to defend the town ? ”

Rienne hesitated. Should he tell Ligny the truth — that the defences in front of Seuilly were in little better state than in May ? Why torment a sick man ?

might have been at G.H.Q. And if I were there, I should fight. . . ." He recovered himself and spoke calmly. "No, no, it's too late for me. I shouldn't fight now."

"Why not, sir?"

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Rienne hesitated. Should he tell Ligny the truth — that the defences in front of Seuilly were in little better state than in May ? Why torment a sick man ?

"Piriac has had no orders," he said.

Ligny closed his eyes. He had no need of malice to help out his intuitive hatred. "Woerth knows what is being prepared," he said. "And he means to get rid of the old man. Piriac, whatever else he is, is not a politician." . . .

In the evening, towards nine o'clock, Rienne called on Labenne. He said he had come from General Piriac, who was anxious about the safety of the foreigners interned at Geulin. Labenne interrupted him.

"Is he going to send them away?"

Rienne hesitated. One way, the most certain, of keeping these men shut up was to try to saddle any one person with the responsibility for moving them. Piriac would hand it to the civilians, who would consult the police, and the poor devils would stay where they were. He appealed to Labenne's vanity.

"The General would like to move these men. He is confident that you will agree with him."

This simplicity almost caught Labenne. For a moment — Rienne saw him — he said to himself: Oh, if the old man wants to make a noble gesture. . . . But in another moment he realised — it was all too clear — that if Piriac had wanted to do anything he would have done it without consulting a civilian. He looked at Rienne with an impressive anxiety.

"I have no authority, even to advise. You must see the head of the police department responsible to the Minister for the camp — Monsieur Drigeard. Shall I ring him up for you?"

"Do," Rienne said. He was used to summing men up by their gestures, and Labenne's were those of an actor. Had he been acting anything except sincerity, Rienne might have been taken in. He listened coolly while Labenne spoke to the police chief about the camp. The moment I have gone he'll telephone again, he thought. . . .

In fact Labenne waited three minutes. When he spoke to M. Drigeard the second time, it was in a changed voice.

". . . I've just sent you a man who is ruining his last chances. You can take it from me that no one except this colonel — who is a friend of Mathieu, and of our Prefect — wants to do anything for these scum. Why should he? They're all agents of Moscow or London."

"I know it, Monsieur Labenne, I know it."

"We all know it," Labenne said, "the Germans know it. They'll know how to deal with their countrymen. I think we can leave it to them. . . . But don't keep me talking, I'm off to bed. I need my seven hours, you know."

"Good-night, Monsieur Labenne."

Labenne was telling the truth. He slept like a baby, turning round once and dropping off. Summer and winter, he was in bed at eleven, and rose hungry and refreshed at six. He slept with his head on his chest and knees drawn up, to leave the least possible area open to attack by impulses — to generosity, to good faith — that he fought off so easily in daylight. . . .

Rienne was not kept waiting. The police chief saw him at once, and was sympathetic and eager. But, of course, ultimately it was a question for the Aliens department of the Ministry of Security. He would telephone, he would do everything he could. Colonel Rienne could be confident. . . . Time? There was always time to act humanely. And in fact now that things were going better . . .

"Better?" Rienne said.

M. Drigeard smiled. "Surely! Since the Germans have agreed not to destroy Paris . . . we can hope . . ."

Chapter 61

THE day before, when Marguerite woke up, she had found waiting in her mind, fully grown, the thought that she must send Catherine out of the way. She meant — if things became worse, or as soon as they became worse — to get herself and Émile away, and the idea of taking Catherine displeased her. The girl would embarrass her at a time when she would need to distract Émile by every trick of body and mind. With Catherine watching, listening, she would be helpless. . . . She rang for Sophie to bring her her coffee; before it came she had written out a telegram to send to the well-to-do American woman she knew, living in England, whose daughter had been Catherine's friend at school. To please Catherine she had sometimes sent the

other girl presents, and she had been charming to the mother when they were both in Paris. It was simple to ask her to take Catherine.

Is it strange that she did all this calmly? Not in the least. The anguish that seized her when she allowed the heart-rending image of a little weeping girl to come into her mind, kept its claws in. She only felt a little nervous. Catherine at eighteen, detached, friendly, was not that child: they had nothing in common. . . . This was not all. The impulse to get rid of her daughter sprang from some recess of her being, below sense or reason. She had begun to do it so early, and although she loved her child. It might be one of the sins she was born to commit. And it is always easy to go on committing a sin. It becomes a habit. Like any habit.

She had not had an answer to her telegram when, this evening, she decided to tell Catherine.

" . . . and you'll be able to practise your English. It's only for a month or two, until we know what's happening here. And if anything very terrible happened, Madame Putnam would take you to America with her. I shall miss you beyond words, but——"

For one moment, Catherine looked as though she were going to cry. She blushed, her mouth trembled. Her mother did not know that what she felt at the sight of this poor face was the warning of a remorse to come. If Catherine had cried . . . if she had said: No, don't send me away again. . . . But her face became hard and sullen.

" So you want to get rid of me? " If she had even said " again. " . . .

" I want you to be safe. "

" Why? I'm not a child, I'm a woman. Other women are not safe. "

" That's no reason, " her mother said.

" It's the best of reasons, " Catherine said passionately. " You want to make me ashamed of myself. No, that isn't what you want, you simply want not to have to bother with me, you want to give all your time to — to him. "

Her insolence delivered her into her mother's hands. Marguerite gave her a terrible look. " You're behaving like a silly girl, " she said with superb anger. " Yet you expect me to treat you as if you were grown up. Very well, you are

grown up. But you'll go to England and try to behave yourself there. And when you come back, we'll find something for you to do — to use your great gifts."

She was half afraid the girl would go on defying her. But the contempt in her mother's voice had broken down Catherine's young sense of injustice and outrage. Tears of shame rushed to her eyes. She cried hopelessly, like a child who knows its offence is so disgraceful that it will never be forgiven.

"I'm sorry," she stuttered, "I didn't mean that, I don't know what I meant, I'm very sorry."

Thank God, Marguerite sighed, I can still frighten her : I couldn't have forced her to go. She turned away. She needed comfort herself : Catherine's insult was already one of those thorns we keep with us to sleep on.

"It's eleven o'clock. You'd better go to bed," she said gently. "Come."

The door opened at this moment, and Lucien Sugny came in. He was blushing as usual, but he looked stubborn. He had a cardboard box under his arm.

"I knocked twice," he said, speaking to Mme de Freppel and looking at Catherine.

"What do you want ?"

"I've brought you the letters and papers in your desk at the Prefecture. The Prefect asked me to tell you they would be safer here. . . . I had a breakdown. It held me up for an hour, that's why I'm late." Suddenly he turned to Catherine. "What are you crying for?" he said in a desperate voice.

Mme de Freppel was startled — then angry. She looked from the young man to her daughter. He had moved nearer to her and they formed a single block — of estrangement, of youth — facing her across a table. She suffered horribly from their youth. Before she could say anything, Lucien spoke again. His face was calm now and he looked at her stolidly.

"I love Catherine," he said.

Her anger gave Mme de Freppel enough self-control to say quietly,

"Really? What do you expect me to say?"

She thought she had hidden her anger, but its electric current had passed between her and Lucien : it would have silenced him if he had not been too absorbed in Catherine to

feel anything more than the shock. He merely stiffened his muscles and glared at her.

Mme de Freppel made another instinctive effort. This time she forced a little warmth into her voice.

"My poor children, I'm very sorry for you. What can I do?"

"You can let us alone," Catherine muttered.

Ignoring her, Mme de Freppel said gently to the young man, "You can't marry anyone, can you? You have no money and no future. And then the war . . ."

Her gentleness defeated Lucien. He blushed again, so deeply that his face seemed to swell. He took a step towards her, away from Catherine, who shivered. Her mother noticed it. It was already a victory.

"I shall do as well as possible in the army," Lucien stammered. "And afterwards——"

"We can't talk about afterwards," Mme de Freppel said in a low voice. "It's no use. There's only the war — and your lack of position. And Catherine, who is only eighteen. How old are you, by the way?"

"Twenty-six."

She smiled at him. "My dear boy. Yet you're quite old enough to know what is possible and what is utterly impossible. Better than Catherine — who is a child. You won't take an unfair advantage of her childishness, will you?"

"Mother——" Catherine began.

Mme de Freppel stood up. "Lucien, I'm going to give you a quarter of an hour to tell Catherine that she must be sensible, you must both be sensible."

She moved towards the door, looking at Lucien. Miserably confused, he was too late to open it for her. When he turned back to Catherine, she was watching him with a sullen smile.

"Please go away," she said. She was vexed that he had seen her crying and humiliated. And need he succumb so easily to her mother's charm? Surely he knew it was false?

Lucien felt wretched and ashamed. He knew he had failed Catherine in some way, but he was too bewildered to see where he had gone wrong. "Are you angry with me?" he said humbly.

"No."

"Then what is it?"

"If you would only go away and leave me."

He looked at her. They moved together in a blind way and began to comfort each other awkwardly, talking without knowing what they were saying. . . . "I'm hideous, don't look at me." . . . "Oh, love, love, you're beautiful." . . . "You shouldn't have let her." . . . "What? I hated her for making you cry. Oh, Catherine, I'm only a fool." . . . Catherine's hands moved over his face: they rubbed a tear they came across, and moved on clumsily to his temples.

"You ought to go," she said steadily, "she might come back." The thought of her mother hardened her.

She went with him into the courtyard. The night was very quiet. There was a full moon, the handlebars of his motor-cycle glittered, and the windows on one side of the yard. Catherine jumped from the courtyard to the drive, across the black shadow thrown by the arch. She was afraid of drowning in the shadows; between the shallow stretches of light, they seemed so deep. She looked into Lucien's eyes and thought she could see herself in them. Her own smarted. . . . This is the worst moment of my life, she thought. . . . She knew that she was smiling.

Chapter 62

MARGUERITE had taken the box of letters and papers to her room. Now that she could think calmly, they made her uneasy. Why had Émile sent them? She turned them out on the floor and looked through them hurriedly. There were bills, letters from Léonie, from other people. She took one out of its envelope. It was a letter from Sadinsky, received only yesterday. He told her that he was leaving Seuilly for Bordeaux, thanked her for the help she had given him, and hoped he would see her again "in a better place". She had laughed at his choice of words. Now she tore the letter across impatiently, and bundled the rest back into the box. She pushed it out of sight in a cupboard. . . . Has Émile been reading them? . . . She felt alarmed, and refused to think about it.

She heard Lucien's motor-cycle at the other side of the house. That nuisance ! she thought wearily. Five minutes later — she had not heard the car — Émile came into the room. She saw that he was profoundly troubled. Her heart sank. . . . How much does he know ? . . . Before she knew which of her acts was going to accuse her she felt guilty of all of them ; she held herself quiet, ready to repulse the attack from whichever quarter it came.

Bergeot came across to her and kissed her, putting his arms round her as though it were he who had to defend her. Against whom . . . ? Her instinct warned her to seem subdued and childlike. She waited, making herself small in his arms, for him to speak and give her her cue. Bergeot released her gently and sat down. After a minute she said in a timid voice,

" Sugny brought my letters."

He did not turn his head to look at her. " I'd rather you didn't come to the Prefecture just now," he said gravely.

A month ago — less than that — she would have flown out against this in a rage and scolded him shrewishly until he agreed that she was right, and he was a fool and she must forgive him. Now she hesitated. The humiliation was too severe. . . . It was not that, it was that she no longer had the strength of her savage nature. Even a little discipline had weakened it. Something — what ? — when ? — had broken in her. When the desire to live quietly with Émile and have his child seized her ? No : not even that was the beginning.

" What was the last letter you wrote from the Prefecture ? " Émile asked.

She shook her head. " I can't remember. Perhaps to Léonie."

" That bitch of a woman has done you nothing but harm."

She did not answer. Since he had no idea what her life was like before she married, he did not know how much of it rested on Léonie's unfailing loyalty. She was thankful to let him think what he liked about her friend.

" Have you seen Bonamy today ? " she asked meekly.

" No. Why do you ask ? "

Hardening herself, she said, " He always gives you such bad advice, you're more reckless than ever after he has been talking to you."

"Reckless?"

"Oh, my love," she said in a coaxing voice, kneeling beside him and putting her head in his hands, "do let us go away. We still have time. We have enough money between us to live carefully. And when I have a child——"

Émile jerked her head back and looked directly at her for the first time. "Are you going to have a child?"

"I think so."

"And you really want me to resign, and go away with you?"

She gave a cry of joy. "It's the only thing I want."

She bore his look, forcing herself to seem calm. All the energy of her will was concentrated on one point. She felt his mind wavering, caught on hers. He is going to give in, she said to herself. She hid her triumph and joy. Bergeot turned away suddenly.

"You wouldn't be happy living a dull life without money," he said. "I know that now."

Her disappointment and the shock of her failure were too much. She closed her eyes, and felt herself losing control. The abyss that opened in her mind laid it bare to its depths; words sprang from this deep source before she could stop them.

"Very well, if we must stay here, at least be sensible," she cried, "and take care if we're defeated to be on the strongest side. The same side as Thiviers and other clever, well-informed people. Even if it's the side of the Germans. Don't let Bonamy ruin you."

"Be quiet," Bergeot said.

He looked at her with contempt. She began to cry quietly. Her crying became convulsive as she ceased quickly to care whether he were moved by it. She was crying for herself now, for her terrible childhood, for all the things she had been driven, it seemed to her, to do, to save herself; and because she had wasted her motherhood; and because her daughter, who no longer loved her, had even insulted her this evening.

Émile began trying to comfort her. She was exhausted and almost indifferent. He was tired out himself: making her sit beside him on the couch, he took hold of her hand; they leaned together without the strength to move. Marguerite's mouth felt dry. What am I? she wondered. She felt that she was lost. The different life she had been

thinking about during the last weeks was a foolish, not simply a difficult dream, and she had been foolish. She felt trapped.

It did not yet enter her mind that she had set the trap herself.

Chapter 63

THE next day, the 14th, it rained again. Women came to their doors to look at it, with an uneasy sense that their sons and husbands were facing a second enemy. If it's anything like it up there, he'll be getting soaked, they murmured. Added to the other uncertainty, this was too much. It was unjust, the rain coming down now on men who were retreating, as — the only person you wanted to enjoy it with absent — the weeks of fine weather had been unjust. And this war was unjust — it was always France which was invaded, and Frenchmen who died. An unjust universe — with a bias against France. Whose sin are we expiating? the politicians? the Republic's? the Jews?

Propped on his couch, its head against the window opening on to the shaft, Mathieu heard all these murmurs in the voices of neighbours talking to his landlady. The clear French sense of this Jew forced him to know that the country's strength was failing — had failed. These bodiless voices filling the shaft might be the stones themselves lamenting. He suffered. He was scarcely conscious of his sick weakness and the aching of torn flesh. Determined that the *Journal* should come out, he dictated to his clerk and sorted reports and communiqués. The cup of milk beside him had a film of dust: he had not touched it.

The door opened. To his surprise — hidden at once — it was his ally the Inspector who came in. His visits had always been made after dark. Mathieu sent his clerk away; no sooner had the man left them than Rienne came.

"Don't go," Mathieu said to the Inspector, "you can trust Colonel Rienne."

The Inspector was satisfied. Sitting down again, he began to speak as though he were making a report. In effect,

he was. He was reporting, in precise words, the weakness and desertion that Mathieu had been listening to all the morning. He ended his report with the news that Huet was back — he had been with the Government in Tours — and running about telling people confidentially that defeat was certain within a few days, and the country, unless the Government surrendered at once, lost. The country, he would say smiling, that is, you and me, helpless as we are.

“ . . . if it was left to our deputy, we shouldn't wait for Monsieur Hitler to come and fetch his breakfast, we should take it to him in bed ! ”

“ Deputy or not, he must be silenced,” Rienne exclaimed.

The Inspector looked at him with respectful irony. “ And while you're about it, you might shut up Monsieur de Thiviers, with his millions of dollars in New York. And Monsieur Émile Bergeot, with his thousands.”

There was a silence, during which Mathieu watched Rienne settle himself like a man determined not to move until he knows how severely he has been wounded. The Inspector broke it to say,

“ These are the men, and their friends in Paris and elsewhere, who have betrayed us.”

“ Rubbish,” Mathieu said coldly. “ What do you mean ? Anyone can betray us ; but unless we betray ourselves, the future is ours, not theirs.”

He was still watching Rienne. Let him get on with it, he thought ; he has only lost a friend.

“ The future ? ”

“ For the present there is no France, there are only Frenchmen,” Mathieu said. And I, he thought, what have I lost ? I shan't see the future, and I shan't see him again.

“ Are you certain that the Prefect has money abroad ? ” Rienne asked the Inspector.

“ Absolutely certain. I have my proofs. Thiviers must have done it for him ; it means, of course, that he's in Monsieur de Thiviers's hands.”

Rienne nodded. He glanced at Mathieu, who took care not to show in his face any of the ridiculous pleasure he was feeling ; after all these years, and after he had been beaten by Émile Bergeot in everything but history, it was obvious now which of the two was the better scholar.

“ The world is infected,” Mathieu said. “ In the past, single nations have succumbed, to greed, or a bad banking

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“ Are you certain that the Prefect has money abroad ? ” Rienne asked the Inspector.

“ Absolutely certain. I have my proofs. Thiviers must have done it for him ; it means, of course, that he’s in Monsieur de Thiviers’s hands.”

Rienne nodded. He glanced at Mathieu, who took care not to show in his face any of the ridiculous pleasure he was feeling ; after all these years, and after he had been beaten by Émile Bergeot in everything but history, it was obvious now which of the two was the better scholar.

“ The world is infected,” Mathieu said. “ In the past, single nations have succumbed, to greed, or a bad banking

system, or a change of climate, or arthritis. This is the first time a germ has attacked humanity. It is eating away the tissues and perverting the patient's appetite, so that he finds cruelty glorious, treachery to his friends a moral imperative, and treason fashionable. Who knows yet whether the disease is going to be fatal? Doctors sometimes tell us that our bodies have begun to tolerate a disease, when what they mean is that the disease has become tolerant and weak. I wonder. When the cancer of arrogance and cruelty has, as they say, run its course, humanity may be dead. Or too weak to recover. That's all. It's very simple."

The Inspector left. As soon as he had gone, Mathieu said,

"Hand me a sheet of paper. I'm going to draft a letter to the Minister. I can get it put into his hands. If he's not too busy arresting members of the Government — I hope he's arresting them — he may still have time to settle a few local traitors."

Rienne looked at him calmly.

"Leave Émile alone," he said. "He's not dangerous. Huet is."

It's no use your putting up this pretence of being calm, Mathieu thought: I can see through you: it's not the first time I've watched agony of mind being pinched between a thumb and finger like a bitter salt. After a single glance at it, he avoided looking at Rienne's hand on his knee. He had enough respect for Rienne to want to save him a humiliation. At the same time he felt contempt. Contempt with a touch of pity.

"Very well. And I'll ask you to do something for me in return." It will let you think of your weakness as cancelled, he thought coldly.

"What is it?"

"You can get into the camp at Geulin, can't you? I want you to go there and tell Uhland what is happening. Will you?" . . .

He was alone for some hours, then his landlady herself came upstairs, breathless and a little frightened.

"Monsieur Mathieu, the Mayor is coming up to see you."

"Let him."

Labenne came into the room with an air of warmth and good-humour; the same glance took in Mathieu leaning stiffly against the end of the couch, and the room's shabby-

ness. He liked, when he came into a room for the first time, to reckon what it would cost him if he chose to buy it. Nothing here that would not be knocked down for a few francs in any market. He sat down, smiling.

"My poor Mathieu," he said in a soft voice, "you're in pain. I was shocked by the attack on you. There is something wrong with society when the police can't prevent such brutalities."

Mathieu was vexed that he could not sit upright. For this confrontation with Labenne, the confrontation of his faith with the other's scepticism and disloyalty, he would have liked to stand. He suffered from having to turn his head to look at Labenne, as though this were a deflection of his will. And, too, he was really in pain.

"There is always something wrong with society," he said drily, "and it is always more or less brutal. There is a fashion in these things. Physical cruelty is more fashionable in western Europe now than it was at the beginning of the century."

Labenne made a pious face. "Manners and morals are going bad together. We need a purge."

"Sinister phrase," Mathieu said. "Especially to a Jew. It happens so often that we are the first to be purged."

"Yet you survive," Labenne smiled.

"We have survived so far. We've made a habit of it. But if the habit of killing us spreads——"

"Let's hope it won't," Labenne said mildly. He looked at his watch. "You and I, Monsieur Mathieu, are hard workers. We never waste time, and you won't suppose that I came here this afternoon only to condole with you."

"Why should you condole?" Mathieu said.

"Ah, you're a stoic. I respect your courage. But I must go on talking of your — your lamentable experience, because it points what I'm going to say. What I'm going to say — I speak as one anxious man to another, you won't misunderstand me — is that the end of the war will be an opportunity for such ruffians. There may be disorders, and they will be started by men who will call themselves patriots. You, with your superb knowledge of history, will recall many such patriots. We must see to it that Seully remains calm. We——"

Mathieu interrupted him. "The end of the war?"

Opening his arms, Labenne cried, "Who knows better

than you do that we can't defend ourselves any longer ? ”

“ I know we can't defend ourselves north of the Loire,” Mathieu said. “ But there are more than two million soldiers who have not fought yet. There is still our empire in Africa.” He lowered his voice. “ There is still France,” he said coldly.

Labenne smiled. “ You are not really a romantic. You know very well that to go on fighting would mean millions of casualties, the death of millions of soldiers and civilians — and defeat in the end. The ruin is too complete, and the disparity between us and Germany is too great. Do you want France to disappear ? ”

“ Not as you do,” Mathieu said, with the same coldness. “ Not into the hands of Germans and the German police. You can see what they have made of their own country.”

“ I can. A country which has defeated Europe.”

“ A concentration camp,” Mathieu said.

Labenne did not answer for a moment. He sat with hands in his pockets, and a face like a heavy mask — which slowly altered its expression to one of simplicity and friendliness.

“ The fact remains,” he said in a quiet voice, “ that the Government will surrender. What then ? What is the duty of people like us — who will have to go on living here ? ”

“ To prepare a resistance.”

“ Of unarmed men ? ”

“ Of all that the Germans will try to destroy — of the memory and habit of freedom.”

“ You're talking in metaphors,” Labenne said, with a smile. “ I don't understand them, I'm only a peasant.”

“ I'm only a Jew,” Mathieu answered. “ But you understand everything you want to, you understand that, in this town alone, it will depend on a few men whether the Germans are treated as conquerors or as the enemy. You, as Mayor, will set an example. Of loyalty or treachery. If you insist on being a peasant, I can put it more simply. Of faith or a lie. For instance, it will be a lie if you tell people that there is anything in common between French civilisation and the German state.”

“ Why, Mathieu,” Labenne said with an air of simplicity, “ do you believe there are two sorts of courage in the world, German and French ? ”

Mathieu's face twitched. “ Why don't you ask me if I

know the difference between invader and invaded ? ”

“ Can’t I persuade you to come down to my level for a few minutes ? ” Labenne said. His eyes sparkled. “ I only want you to agree that all of us who care for Seuilly must act together — after the armistice. For the sake of order, incidentally for our own sakes. You, as a Jew — forgive me if I speak brutally — will scarcely be happy under German rule. You may not even be safe. But you have an influence . . . your reputation as an honest man . . . and no doubt as a journalist you know a great deal about a great many people . . . I feel sure I could convince even a German commander that you ought to be well treated.”

The silence this time was broken by a boy whistling in the courtyard — a song, he must have learned it from father or brother, of the last war. The sound flew up the narrow shaft. Mathieu seemed to listen. At last he said,

“ Just now you called yourself a peasant, and I saw you, when you came into my room, look round it like a man who knows the price of things. I’m sure you do——”

“ Well ? ” Labenne said almost merrily.

“ You couldn’t know my price.”

“ I don’t know it yet,” Labenne said with his charming smile.

“ It doesn’t matter,” Mathieu said, “ you couldn’t pay it. You’ll find it cheaper to buy your own safety from the Germans, even if that costs you everything you have. It will.”

Labenne stood up. During the quarter of an hour he had been in the room he had been turn by turn a number of men. They were all tossed back into his mind. He looked at Mathieu, his thick lips pursed a little, his eyes, except for a pin-point of light in the upper half of the pupil, well guarded. For the rest, the lines of his face were drawn downwards. He was considering, with the professional coolness of an executioner, a possible subject.

“ A pity,” he said. “ Yes, a great pity.”

“ What a word ! ” Mathieu said drily.

Chapter 64

EDGAR VAYRAC had been released this morning. As soon as he was in the house he asked for a bath, and he let his mother wait on him, sponging his feet and back, as she used to when he was a boy, long after he was old enough to attend to them himself. She was foolish with happiness. If the water had been cut off in Seuilly this morning, she would willingly have licked him over. She examined his handsome body for marks made on it by his eight months in prison. There were none. It was still a supple machine of brown flattened planes ; since she was surprised, he told her that from the end of the first week he had been treated almost as a guest, allowed to exercise in the Governor's walled garden, even to lie there in the sun. Ah, his mother thought, I did that. At this moment she felt strong enough to carry him on her back : it did not seem impossible that she had given birth to a human being stronger and taller than herself. Her body was still a defence for his, she felt it heavy with pride and contentment, and the certainty that from now on his life was safe, the points had been changed, to become famous he had only to go on living. She tapped his forehead.

"What a box !" she said, laughing. "What have you in it ?"

"My tools."

When his mother left him, Vayrac stretched himself in the bath, letting the last vestiges of his life in prison float from him. During these months he had had time to meditate. He believed he had shed the last of his sentimentalities in prison, the last of his illusions that success will come easily to a young man without scruples. That had been a serious weakness ; he was vexed that he had let it delay him so long. At twenty-nine, he had nothing to show for his years except a trapper's familiarity with the sordid undergrowth of politics ; he found his way about in it by instinct now, knowing which blackmailer was protected — at eight removes — by a Minister, able without a warning to catch the light change of the wind when a receiver turned police spy. To think that he had been proud of these talents ! The only item he could still put to his credit was his alliance

with Labenne and Huet. It was on this he must build. Only on this.

He was not even sure which of the two men would be more useful to him. Now that he knew what to look for, he would soon find out — but without betraying either of them prematurely. A thing he had learned about himself during his eight months' meditation was that he had a weakness for vilifying and betrayal. It was obviously a weakness — to be curbed if he meant to succeed. There is always time to ruin an ally, but rarely time or means to restore him if the betrayal has been ill-judged.

Another stroke he had planned was to climb into society by the quickest path. That is, by some woman. Until now, he had only made use of women — apart from business — during a rare brutal access of lust. He did not like or respect them. All the respect he was capable of towards a woman he had given to his mother. He was devoted to her. She doesn't know me, he said to himself; it doesn't matter, she would help me even if she did. . . . In prison he had considered carefully the benefits — money and social connections — he could hope for as the lover of a rich woman. He did not overrate the influence of women in politics; they functioned, he knew, more as irritants than as minds. But, he said to himself, once in that world I can amuse myself comfortably anywhere else.

He dressed, and went downstairs to lunch with his mother. His first meal, she thought, smiling. He disappointed her by eating only the plainest of the dishes, a fillet of beef with young peas. "But you sent me so many langoustes and so much *pâte* and cold truffled chicken that this is all I want," he said, teasing her: "it's admirable, I see that you haven't let the war interfere with you."

"Oh, the war!" she said.

She rarely listened to the wireless or looked at a newspaper. She was indifferent. She had her son. Doubly sunk in her maternity and her senses, she could not imagine that the end of the war would affect her in any way.

After their meal, he told her that he was going to see Labenne.

"Be careful with him," she said, "he's very cunning."

"I know. He can teach me a few tricks. In a year or less I shall surprise him. Trust me. . . . And this evening I'm dining with Huet and his wife."

" Really ? "

" Why not ? Now that I've suffered, as they say, for my convictions, I'm interesting enough for Madame Huet to want to look at me. She shall look." He kissed her and went out, turning in the doorway to ask, "What have we in the house ? "

" A charming girl, quite beautiful, from Bordeaux," Mme Vayrac said. Did you think, her expression said, that I should let your first day at home find me short of anything ?

" Good." He smiled. " I hope she's not any of your *écrevisses à la crème*."

" A fillet," Mme Vayrac said, " a good sensible little fillet."

Sitting facing the Mayor, and a young man, the editor of the *New Order*, he had not met before, Vayrac listened closely while Labenne told him what was going on in Seuilly, and what, " if things take the right turn ", he intended should go on.

" Isn't it possible," Vayrac asked, " that the war will go on — from Africa ? "

" Possible and impossible," Labenne said. " The decision has been taken. I have that on authority. But there are sure to be a few protests — from the blind, the halt and the deaf. And that brings me to our Prefect, to Monsieur Jean-Émile Bergeot."

Derval's excitement disgraced him at this moment by a shrill laugh. He blushed when Vayrac looked at him. Taking no notice, Labenne went on,

" In certain circumstances — which you can imagine — he would be a public danger, and we should have to get rid of him. No doubt a number of prefects will be dismissed, but it might be wiser to push his business a little further for him . . . a trial for treason. Even if he were not shot — if he only got a life sentence — he would be ruined."

" The best thing that could happen to him," Derval cried.

" The best and too good. Too unsafe," Vayrac said drily.

Labenne looked at him with reserve. " What would you do ? "

" I should kill him."

" We must be prepared to do anything for our own good

and Seuilly's," Labenne said, with a pious grimace. "But you're speaking metaphorically."

"Oh, of course," Vayrac said in his quiet voice.

"Are you really?" Derval had the fatuity to sound disappointed. What an ass, Vayrac said to himself, surprised. Labenne noticed his surprise and the younger man's nervous excitement. Tapping Derval's arm, he reminded him that he had not yet shown up the draft of a handbill he was writing. "You run along and do it now, my boy." My boy was reluctant to go, every movement of his spruce body showed his resentment, but he went off with smiling promptness. As he was going, he gave Vayrac a cool glance; the thought crossed Vayrac's mind that for all his excitement he was fairly self-possessed. Not dangerous yet, he decided. He frowned. That was twice he had changed his mind about Derval in as many minutes.

"One moment," Labenne shouted.

Derval came back, one hand on his hip in the pose of a dancer. Labenne gave him another order. He was to insert in tomorrow's *New Order* a paragraph expressing the hope that the aliens at Geulin were well guarded; some of them might be enemy agents, spies, waiting to cut telegraph wires and send false orders.

"You're going to hand them over to their own police?" Vayrac asked.

"Who else would want them?" Labenne said.

"Oh, quite!"

"They're worthless and trouble-makers. Frankly, I can't imagine a better use for them — or indeed another use. I don't think I need to prove my good faith — it ought to be obvious — but, damn it, I like to fill my basket. . . . Besides, they're all socialists, and I've worn the radical-socialist label so long that it's time I rubbed it out." He looked at Vayrac under his eyelids. "You see how prudent I am!" Stretching his arms, he added, "They ought to be used to a little unpleasantness by now."

Vayrac nodded. He was anxious to see the effect on Labenne when he told him that he was dining with Huet.

"There's a four-letter man for you," Labenne said drily.

"He came to see me in prison, about three weeks ago. Do you want to know what he said about you? That when it was to your own interest you would help him to get me out."

"Ah, I'll remember that," Labenne said, with a cold

rage. He hid it under a gross laugh. "Monsieur Huet ought to stick closer to me than a brother. How many times do you suppose I've kicked him? Publicly and privately. And if he's faithful to anyone, it's to the politician who is insulting him most cynically at the moment. He admires, I believe he loves his enemies! He must love his own bottom, to turn it up so often. I tell you, the surest way to make him despise you is to try to help him. Treat him as a friend — can anyone? — and he'll do his best to ruin you. He really enjoys ruining a colleague, especially a man he suspects of being honest. . . . Have you ever heard him speak? He's eloquent — he runs over like burned milk — and always off the point. Unless he's the point himself. At the end of his speech you realise that he's been subtly — it's gross but it's subtle — undermining the very cause he set out to defend. Any cause he takes up is doomed. Perhaps he does it unconsciously — he may have been born in two minds about living. Mind you, my friend, I commend a careful politician. But it's fatal to let people see that you're thinking in two opposite directions at once. When Ernest Huet is slandering a friend, he insists that he's doing it out of kindness or a sense of justice. Oh, he's a fox — except that a fox smells of himself. But what Huet smells of, what peculiar treachery or vanity, even I can't make up my mind."

Vayrac was satisfied that Labenne meant to help him. For his own purpose, of course. And Labenne's sole purpose, he would bet on it, was his power. Why else was he surrounding himself with men who had nothing to commend them but their ambition and rapacity? . . . He wants us to shark for him; while we swim round him he'll keep us alive and fat. All right, Monsieur Labenne, I can wait. Not too long. . . .

"Monsieur Huet won't fox me," he said lightly.

"Good."

Without warning, Labenne began to speak in a curt voice. His air of peasant good-humour was gone, he no longer troubled to treat Vayrac as an equal; he gave him orders. They were simple enough. He was not to quarrel with any of his old friends — or with any new ones. With Huet, for instance. "Go everywhere, listen, and make your reports to me. Except to me, keep your mouth shut."

Labenne had formed his opinion of Vayrac at their first

meeting. He believed him to be at least as apt for treachery as Huet, but with less reasoning about it. He would betray from his sense of paradox, from an instinctive pleasure in disorder. Vayrac, Labenne said to himself, is one of those men born expressly to be made use of by a skilful Minister of Police during the interval when one society is going down and the next is not quite safe in its seat. Good — I can use him. Later . . . we'll see. . . .

He felt doubtful about Vayrac's future. Every society needs tools for its unavowable work of keeping itself safe. Unavowable because it involves injustice and severity. But was Vayrac the type which can settle down, in the police or the counter-police, to an honest routine of spying and informing for the new authorities? Wouldn't that be too tame for him; if you like, too moral — the morality of power? . . . We'll see, Labenne repeated. . . . What at the moment he saw most clearly was that Vayrac's weakness, the fault where you had him, was his taste for violence. It might be as well to let him kill someone, so that he would be marked. It might even — as a politician Labenne did not exclude any possibility — be a public-spirited assassination, which a rising politician would be thankful to see taking place without his having to do anything but deplore it.

"You can go now," he said amiably. . . .

Vayrac revised a little his judgement of the Mayor of Seully. He's more intelligent, he said to himself, than I thought — and means to use more than he helps. He doesn't mean any of his dependents to be able to do without him.

Vayrac's self-esteem was not easily injured, he knew himself too well. At least, I'm beginning a little higher up than a police spy, he thought, smiling — we'll see. . . .

Chapter 65

HE looked carefully at Mme Huet. He knew about her that she was fashionable, immensely rich, and neatly related to old families which had been given a blood transfusion from heavy industry. He did not know her tastes. Very soon he

gathered that it would be no use his pretending to share them, he did not know what Chagall was, Maurras he had heard of but thought he was dead, and for several minutes he believed he had discovered a new political party in surrealism. Besides, he was not anxious to impress her. If they were going to be allies, she must respect his indifference to all forms of art : they did not amuse him, and he had, he felt it, only too little time — even if he were to last out the century — for what did.

Mme Huet did not attract him. He detested women with big bones and flat colourless bodies. She had, he guessed, been robust and lethargic, and now was only tired. It will be abominably hard work, he thought : is she even bearable ? Already he was punishing her for making his future difficult.

He listened to her husband with the same frigid intolerance. The deputy had been useful to him, he knew a great many influential people — was it possible that Labenne had been moved by his distaste for an ambitious bore ? Possibly the deputy would be more useful to him than Labenne, and he ought to change sides ? . . . But Huet's gestures and voice, even when he was saying things that from another man would have been proof of an almost excessive honesty, gave off an odour of bad faith. He would give me away to Labenne out of mere moral frivolity, Vayrac thought. In Paris they must distrust him as much as I do. . . . No doubt Huet had influence in certain quarters — after all, he was a deputy — but, in the new France, what would it be worth ? If he was not able to exact his price ? A dishonesty which does not know how to make itself valued must be worth even less than a genuine virtue ! Not a chance that Huet was one of the men who were going to ride France into the new age — if he were, he would not be sitting here. At this very moment, the new men were certainly all at work somewhere. Besides, the deputy had all the marks of a politician who has undershot his bolt — he talked of his scruples, his friends, and showed off his learning like the pedant he would have done better to be. . . . I believe he's a coward, Vayrac thought ; and you don't survive a revolution only on a talent for treachery, without courage.

"Why don't you make up your mind to write your memoirs ?" he asked.

He saw that Mme Huet had noticed the insolence. She gave no sign that she was displeased. Ah, he said to himself,

one of these devoted wives who keeps a small store of malice for her husband under her devotion.

"All in good time," the deputy smiled. "At present I'm too busy living them."

"You could notice that I remembered to order trout for you," his wife said.

"Ah, so you did. But why trouble? Eating is not one of my weaknesses. You should have married Georges Labenne. . . . And ought we to be enjoying ourselves when the Germans are in Paris?" he said gaily. "What is more, I'm informed — not from Berlin — that they've broken through the impregnable Maginot." He smiled and blinked. "It's sad, but let's drink to the end of a long feud and the beginning of a longer peace. My dear young friend, four days ago, at Langey, I heard with my own ears Weygand say that the war was lost. No loyal Frenchman ever rejoiced as I did in that moment. I mean that I am a loyal Frenchman and I rejoiced boldly. Mark, I don't say that the Germans are civilised. By some miracle they escaped the curse from which we've been suffering since the Middle Ages — with the result that if I had brought a bricklayer in to dinner he would think himself called on to have ideas about justice and what not. We French are impossible. What other nation is reckless enough to let its bricklayers and infants stare every day at the three words that stand for three of the most dangerous abstractions in the world? . . . During the last few years, our German neighbours have shown how much a people owes to its primitive instincts — its savagery, if you like. In Germany, the word, the fatal word, has been made flesh. And such sprightly flesh! Liberty — which shuns the meetings of our democrats — flourishes at the other side of the Rhine in its true form, the liberty to obey and prosper. Justice, equality, of which we have seen nothing since we began pretending to popularise it, has been born again in the will of a leader. Fraternity . . . that reminds me, Hitler's kindness to Madame Huet when he received her, last year about this time, struck me as a good omen. I believe he will respect France. Do you agree, my dear Vayrac?"

"Certainly."

"Ah, I'm delighted."

"Hitler," Vayrac said, "is going to save us the trouble of shooting or beheading five or six million irreconcilables."

This single phrase silenced the deputy. Vayrac turned to Mme Huet. She had been sparkling with interest in her husband's eloquence, without attending to a word. While Vayrac talked to her, he could see Huet reassuring himself. . . . He is deciding that I meant it figuratively, that I can be employed and kept in order by a finer intelligence — his ! . . .

They went into another room to drink coffee. Mme Huet told Vayrac that this room had disgraced itself by pleasing Napoleon's dear Berthier, the Prince de Wagram — "a labourer, wasn't he, by birth?" — so much that he came back to it several times, although one of the benefits he drew from his success with the usurper was the delicious Château de Chambord : "now, as of course you know, in the family of my friend the Princesse de Parme". . . . The windows, eight of them, were open on to the garden, where a single jet of water was giving the grass and some fat sparrows the benefits of the Loire. The rain had stopped, and the light, now that part at least of the day's heat had dropped as sediment to the lowest levels of the ground, was brilliantly clear.

"That wretched fellow Bergeot," cried Mme Huet. "He would be the first to start murdering us."

Vayrac looked at her with admiration. "He might stop short at confiscation."

The moment he had swallowed his coffee, Huet said in a solemn voice that he must leave them, he was now going to telephone to Bordeaux, to a friend who would tell him what the Cabinet had decided in today's sitting. When Vayrac was pressing his hand he felt it tremble. Still a little afraid of me, he thought, amused.

The deputy hurried off. Just as Vayrac was going to ask permission to stay, a servant announced Lieutenant de Saint-Jouin. Mme Huet was standing up, she took a step forward, turning her back on Vayrac, who could see her face in a mirror. He read on it surprise, derision, joy. The pretty soldier, he thought, is her lover, and neglects her. This discovery might be useful to him. At the moment it was only a chance to make her grateful to him, and he took it by leaving at once. The smile she gave him, withdrawn for a moment from Saint-Jouin, was almost tender. Payment in advance, he said to himself. . . .

As soon as he had gone, the young officer said carelessly,

"What a common brute, who is he?" Without waiting for any answer he went on, "I've come to say goodbye, I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Oh. Where?" Mme Huet said.

"My sweet Andrée, you mustn't ask to be told secrets! I'll only tell you that tomorrow evening I shall be drinking claret, the best in the country."

"Oh, it's Bordeaux. Why? Is the war over?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Mme Huet closed her eyes. "If it's over at last, you'll be safe."

Saint-Jouin laughed and let go of her hands. "Astonishing creatures women are!" he cried. "The superb way you have of ignoring everything except your feelings. It would make you dangerous as statesmen or diplomats. Let Europe perish if only *he* is kind to me tonight! Marvellous — and frightful. . . . Don't look so tragic, my dear."

Mme Huet forced herself to say, "And do you never feel that?"

"Oh, men are just as insane in their way. But fortunately for the world we don't take our love-affairs so seriously."

Her despair and his fatuity were equally shocking to her. That I can still suffer like this, she thought — and for this silly fellow. She felt herself old and heavy.

"My dear Jacques," she said, with a smile, "what a bore you're becoming with your aphorisms. You're almost dull enough for the Senate. Have you ever thought of politics? Or criticism? I've read just such — what shall I call it? — motto-work written by young men who are trying to make names for themselves. Do think of it!"

Not sure how seriously his vanity had been hurt, Saint-Jouin sulked for a few minutes, then left. She saw in his face that he was promising himself not to come back. He did not need her . . . and now that she didn't even take the trouble to flatter him. . . .

She had no wish to be alone with herself. Her sister-in-law, whom she had expected to make the fourth at dinner this evening, had not even telephoned to make excuses. She decided to go to the Hôtel Buran and find out the reason for herself.

She found the Baronne de Chavigny packing, that is, frenziedly hindering her maid. When Mme Huet came in, the woman looked at her with relief and said, "There now,

if Madame will only leave me alone for an hour, I can finish. And Madame can get a little sleep."

"Sleep! But we must leave in an hour," Mme de Chavigny cried.

"Why, where are you going?" Andrée asked.

Her sister-in-law took her into the next room and shut the door. Her face, not made up, was drawn with fear. Rolling her eyes like a nervous horse, she told Andrée in whispers that a Minister had rung her up from Bordeaux and warned her that it was all up, she had better go South — at once.

"But why? You're quite safe here."

"No, no, there may be air raids," Mme de Chavigny cried; "there might be one tonight."

"You didn't think of asking me to come with you," Andrée said mischievously.

Mme de Chavigny was confused. "I was going to wire to you from Bordeaux."

"My dear Bobo," Andrée said, smiling, "you Jews are always so cowardly and hysterical. Don't let me delay you a minute. But I must say that if you really want to leave in an hour, you'd better let Marie alone. Why not make yourself presentable? You look like an old-clothes woman."

Every word of this insult was a comfort to her. She felt almost happy.

Chapter 66

WHEN Rienne came in, the officer in charge of the camp was finishing his dinner. He offered Rienne a drink, and was disappointed when he refused. He was bored by his job; he seized every chance to complain, in the belief that his complaints would not bore his listener. Rienne asked to be taken directly to Uhland's hut. There were two hundred and fifty men in the camp, and four huts, named after the points of the compass. But there had been a mistake, and the East hut, where Uhland lived, was on the west side of the camp. The officer was amused. "As they never see the sun rising or setting, they stand and look at the river through

the wire, and imagine they're looking towards the sea, no doubt thinking how jolly it would be to be on a ship : in fact, they're gaping towards Germany. . . . Well, if you must see this Boche, you must. Why not see him in here ? ”

Rienne insisted on going to the hut.

The air was fresh after the rain. The Loire — which knew very well which way it was going — smiled discreetly and innocently. To step from this sober evening into the hut was very like stepping at night into a trench filled with rotting bodies : Rienne thought he recognised the German smell ; even in the same sort of trench Germans do not smell like Frenchmen. Except for the stains of light spreading from the candles belonging to wealthy prisoners, those still a few francs above the deepest level of misery, the place was dark ; heads without bodies, and bodies mutilated where the darkness began, hung or leaned in these vague circles : a stink, malignant and active, seized Rienne by the throat and forced him to stand still until he could breathe it.

The corporal who had come in with him was pushing his way through a layer of human maggots. Near Rienne, a voice issuing from a peculiarly sour smell shouted in French, “ What’s up now ? ” : heaving and falling away in the darkness, the maggots gave an illusion of having white faces. Suddenly a man appeared in front of Rienne and announced himself stiffly. “ Joachim von Uhland.”

“ I am Colonel Rienne. I have a message for you from Monsieur Louis Mathieu, and I should like to talk to you for a few minutes.” Rienne hesitated. “ I didn’t know what these huts were like. Have you a corner of your own ? ”

“ At the far end,” the other said. “ We’d better stay here. It’s fresher.”

The word shocked Rienne, suffocating him by what it implied. He sent the corporal outside. Now that his eyes were used to the darkness, he could see that Mathieu’s friend was of middle height and emaciated ; he had dark hair, and was so unlike the Germans of Ligny’s nightmare that Rienne could not help smiling : his face offered little more surface to the light of the candle in front of him than a knife. Standing close to him, Rienne felt the tension of his body — like an exposed nerve.

“ Mathieu has had an accident, a broken leg and ribs. He’s recovering. He’s anxious about your safety.”

“ None of us here is safe,” Uhland said calmly. “ Are we

going to be kept here until the Gestapo arrives? The authorities must know what that means. Why not let us run away? Or shoot us? There are even six German doctors here, they arrived last week, who had been working with your Red Cross."

"Try to understand the situation," Rienne said. "This country is in great danger."

"I know."

"Some of you may be enemies."

"Five of us in this hut are full-blooded Nazis."

"You see?"

"One of them was released a fortnight ago, he had influential French friends. . . . Forgive me — I'm not sneering at you. I understand the situation. . . . Besides, your country has allowed me a few years of happiness. It is a country to be happy in. I shall thank it for that — as long as I live."

Rienne was seized by a painful anger. What had happened to give treachery its new powers in France? He felt a bitterness grosser than the smells of this place. If the Prussian had been abusive about his lot, Rienne would have been able to ignore him. But he could not ignore so polite a victim. With an effort he said calmly,

"I've done what I can to persuade the authorities that you ought to be moved."

"Well?"

"If there is time, I shall try again."

"Do you think you will succeed?" Uhland asked.

Rienne did not hesitate. "No."

There was a scarcely perceptible pause. The Prussian said softly, "The fact is, no government can approve of revolutionaries, or feel willing to take any trouble to save them from being murdered. Not even Russia, not even a communist government. There are men in this camp who could have gone to Russia after the Spanish defeat, but they were refused. A revolutionary is always a nuisance to governments, the more uncompromising he is the less he is likely to be acceptable anywhere. It's quite natural that we should be in this place. . . . All the same I should like to feel clean again before dying. To be so filthy puts one at a disadvantage."

"I regret I couldn't do anything," Rienne said.

"Good of you to try. It's not your fault that our enemies

are our countrymen and likely to treat us much worse. Not so much out of brutality — though we Germans are brutal — but because we are their conscience . . . their ghosts. . . . Look at me," the German said quietly, "they'll be forced to torture me again so that they can forget the first time. Besides, who likes to meet his conscience in filthy rags, smelling of latrines? Also a great many of us are Jews, and we — you see I never know when to say 'they' — have been brought up to kill Jews on principle. A great nation must have its principles."

He smiled slightly. Rienne was watching him for signs of that arrogance which should be natural to him. But Uhland was speaking with simplicity and calm.

"You are a soldier," Rienne said, "you understand that a country is not itself during a war."

"Of course," the Prussian said quickly. "Only the soldiers are themselves, they go on doing as they're told. I have no doubt that even now you would be able to talk more easily with an enemy officer than with some of your own countrymen."

"No," Rienne said. He raised his voice a little. "No, the Germans are invaders. I don't respect a soldier for giving an order to destroy my village with its children and vineyards."

"Have you never had to obey an order which offended you?"

"Of course. But it was always in defence of France. I was in the last war."

"So was I. One night in February '17, my company raided your lines and brought back two prisoners, both of them badly wounded. They died in our trench. We nursed one of them, a boy of eighteen, for two days and nights, and he died holding my hand. At the time we felt we had murdered him. So perhaps it's merely just to keep me here. . . . But some of us are too young to have wronged you."

"Oh," Rienne said, "if we're going to balance wrongs, there will never be peace." He hesitated. "Let me say one thing. I don't look on you as an enemy."

"Our hatreds have been cancelled out," Uhland said, smiling.

"Perhaps. In any case, I'd willingly get you out of this."

He looked round him. Two faces were silhouetted on the little ring of light. One, very young, had high cheekbones and eyes staring fixedly and gravely : the other was a mask of Heine, held back as though already it faced a line of rifles. It needed an effort to detach these men from their dark background ; Rienne shuddered at the vision of them tumbled with Uhland into some ditch, this place their closest memory. Or were they able to see behind it ? At least they would know why they were dying ; their murderers would only be obeying an order, with more or less stupidity.

"Have you a message you want me to deliver ? Or a letter ?"

"Thank you," Uhland said. "Tell Mathieu from me to clear out before the Germans arrive, they'll have as little mercy on French Jews as on German ones, and he won't be able to count on his Government to look after him. I may be wrong, but I believe that France, the true France, is going to be defeated for a time. It's unfortunate for you French — and for Europe — that you are fighting a war when you ought to have been looking for a Renaissance. Which is overdue. . . . Give Mathieu" — he hesitated very briefly — "my warm regards. If I knew you better," he added, smiling, "I should advise you to get used to disillusion. But you look to me like a lucky man. Probably you'll die fighting."

Rienne could find nothing to say to a soldier whose chances of a sensible death were so much poorer than his own. He held his hand out.

The Prussian shook it warmly. "Goodbye. Very good of you to come."

Rienne looked back from the doorway. Uhland had the candle in one hand, and he raised the other in a half salute. The light marked out his delicately arched nose and the vertical line, like a scar, between his eyebrows. He was smiling almost hospitably. . . .

When Rienne was outside the barbed wire, he noticed that the light had changed, and the freshness. Still clear and precise, they were nevertheless withdrawing — like that true France Uhland had spoken about. And it was obvious that if they entered the camp they would be defeated, by the smells of fear and ordure. Except perhaps in a few of the minds waiting there to be broken into — in Uhland's, for one.

Chapter 67

THE benefits of the Loire — a light breeze smelling of seaweed, and the scent of young leaves, history, and Spanish broom — waited on Lucien Sugny. He was in the kitchen of the Manor House, leaning against the open window. The room was almost dark, Sophie had not lit the lamp. It was she who had let him in, and she was keeping her eye on him. She had given way to Catherine's coaxing so far as to send her grandson with the letter that had brought him here at ten o'clock, but she mistrusted him. All the more that she was almost certain she knew a family of his cousins. Could it be right for Mademoiselle Catherine to have to do with the son of a family whose cousins, if Sophie knew them, were a sly rough lot who once did her own aunt's nephew out of fifty francs? — it was a story about a goat. At last she said sharply,

"Are they your cousins living at Villiers, where I come from? The father has a cottage and three cows, his name is Jean-Marie Sugny and his wife was a Durieu of la Croisée."

Lucien turned his head. "Yes."

"Well, I know them," the old woman grumbled. "They've lived across the stream from us since I was a child, and that's not a year or two."

"Jean-Marie Sugny is my uncle, my father's eldest brother. My father lives at la Croisée, he has four cows and three goats. As you see, ours is the branch of the family which has gone up in the world."

All those Sugny's fly out as soon as look at you, Sophie thought, vexed, if you dare to ask a reasonable question. This is a bad business. She did not soften when Catherine ran into the room and flung both arms round her. "Where is he? Blessed, blessed Sophie, I love you."

"There, he's there," the old woman said drily, "don't make this fuss. It doesn't make me feel any better. We're both doing a wrong thing."

Lucien had come round the corner of the tall cupboard between the windows. The girl ran to him. They stood looking at each other in silence, not even touching hands. Even in the little light, and with her weak sight, Sophie

thought the young man had paled. And so he ought, she said to herself. But she was a little sorry for him. Perhaps after all, the world being what it is, a Sugny and a Made-moiselle de Freppel are not so badly matched. She shuffled to the other end of the long room.

"You can talk," she said over her shoulder, "I shan't hear."

Lucien and Catherine had not thought about her. They were standing there, exchanging, not promises, but eyes, ears, profiles, and, they believed, souls. . . . Catherine felt herself becoming reserved in her gestures, with a distaste for noisy emotions: every moment she was more willing to taste life in small mouthfuls, as one rolls an old brandy round the tongue before swallowing it; she was beginning to distrust enthusiasm and to think discretion and politeness a better pair of gloves; she no longer hoped that her life would make a mark on history, she would be content if it got over its difficulties decently, and the longer it lasted the more lightly she would take it, and be the readier to laugh; if sometimes she smiled a little maliciously at the lyricism of a friend who had not had her lessons in calmness and endurance, she would say nothing to wound: under all this, under the tenacity, the taciturnity and the hardness, a passion steady and quickly roused, two qualities of passion rarely found together, except perhaps in the Vendean peasant she was becoming. . . . As for Lucien, he did not know what was happening to him, why for a moment he saw clearly without his glasses, so clearly that he could see the fine line drawn round the pupil of Catherine's eyes, and the veins crossing at the base of her throat; he saw her obstinacy and gentleness, folded together like the pair of hands thrusting through a cloud in old engravings; her fear of the cold; her selfishness of an only child, mistrustful; her modesty and good-humour, her honesty and simplicity, the strength in her immature body. . . . To end a strain which was becoming unbearable, and because he felt that the cords in his throat were being drawn so close that in another moment he would suffocate, he said — he croaked,

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow morning. We start at five o'clock. *He* made them promise to have a seat for me in the train to Bordeaux, they say it will be the last, and at Bordeaux a friend of his, I forget his name, I have it written down, is

going to meet me, and the boat will be leaving at once, his wife is going on it—" her voice quickened — "Tomorrow at this time I shall be looking at the Gironde and thinking about you."

"Are you sea-sick?" Lucien asked.

"Of course not. I don't know, I've never been on the sea."

He took her hand and held it. Then they turned to the window and looked out at the courtyard. Catherine leaned against him, her head on his shoulder, her shoulder pressing his arm; a current of agonised happiness set out from these points to reach his throat and his chest.

"I can't breathe," he mumbled.

"Look hard at the martins under the roof of the stables," Catherine said. "You'll find it helps."

"You know I can't see them."

"But I'm seeing them for you. One of them is much larger than the others, he has a bar on his wings, I think he's the general — yes, one of the others has just saluted him."

"I love you terribly," Lucien said, "I don't know what I shall do."

"Oh, my love, you'll join the army — my mother says there may not be an army much longer, but I don't believe her. Next time I see you, you'll have a dozen bars, all the other martins will be saluting you, and I . . . I shall say something cheeky, to bring you to your senses."

Her voice, which had set out pertly, had become more and more disorderly, until at last it was routed. She lifted her head so that her tears would fall on the window-sill and not on Lucien. "That was all we needed," she said, "a good rain."

Lucien put his arms round her. In defiance of Sophie, who had crept up close to them when she could not endure any longer the sound of Catherine's crying, he kissed her face and hands, holding her head between his large hands, as large and powerful as his father's, but not knotted, not distorted and blackened, not covered with old badly-healed cracks.

"Take care," he muttered, "take care, you'll make yourself so tired . . . and since you have to start at five. . . ."

"You may well say so," Sophie said drily. "Tomorrow she'll look as though she'd slept on the floor. You must go now."

Catherine's tears had stopped. "Not yet, Sophie, not for a minute."

"Always not for a minute! Time to go to bed, Miss Catherine — Not for a minute — Time to wash your hands, to wake up, to go to sleep — No, no, not for a minute. . . . Come."

"But it may be years before I see him again," the girl said.

"Then a minute or two now makes no difference," Sophie said. "Come. Suppose one of the maids was to come in. They will — any minute."

"I must go," Lucien said.

"My love."

"Goodbye." He pushed her towards the old woman and walked quickly to the door. Catherine ran after him. He held her off. "Goodbye."

Suddenly submissive, she took his hand and kissed the palm, closing his fingers over it.

"Until I see you again," she said, smiling.

Lucien groaned and ran out. He slammed the door, setting every bowl and pan in the room jangling.

"Those Sugnys! They have neither manners nor money, you shouldn't get mixed up with them," Sophie scolded. "I don't say he's not a good lad, but what is he, after all?"

Catherine looked at her. "That's enough, Sophie."

"Very well. . . . And you'll go to bed?"

Dropping her awkward dignity, the girl sighed, "Yes, yes, but I shan't sleep."

The old woman turned her head aside to smile.

Chapter 68

JUNE 15th. . . . If Mourey were still making notes for his history of Seuilly — which supposes that he still lived not a little of his time in the future — he must have written under this date the single word "fear". It was the day of the great fear, the first day of refugees. In the last two or three days, housewives and shopkeepers had turned their heads,

with a lively or inquisitive pity, to look after some car or other as it crossed the bridge from the north. "Look. They've come from up there" — "up there" being any of the departments where, if you listened regularly to the communiqués, the army was counter-attacking, retreating according to orders received, and completing the prescribed movements in the greatest order. Few people, even ex-soldiers, understood the communiqués. This success should have gratified the writers. Of their local newspapers, one exhorted to firmness and faith, the other had adopted a tone of confusing gaiety. Newspapers from outside arrived days late and by that time were not worth reading. Not knowing quite what to think about the war, Seuilly thought — as usual — about itself and its vines and deaths and births.

This morning, a woman crossed the High Street at eight o'clock with her shopping bag, and spent an hour foraging in side streets and gossiping with her daughter-in-law: it was to see her and hear whether the boy had written lately that she came so far out of her neighbourhood. At nine o'clock, when she came back to it, she waited twenty minutes to cross. In an hour it had become gorged with traffic. Grasping her bag, she watched, as stupefied as if she were at the pictures: the cars, the farm carts, the delivery vans, the drays, the bicycles, the exhausted eyes, the children perched holding by their claws to the sides of waggons, the bird-cages, the clocks, the child pulling feathers out of the pillow under the woman's head, is she dying?, the sewing-machine, the small monkey, the mattresses, how many mattresses?, in the lorry the heaps of children fallen together like skittles and the woman pulling on one of them, gently, not to waken the rest, the voices lamenting the dust, the old man who stumbled right to her feet, and sat with his head hanging, "I can't go on", the two frenzied women, "You must, father, they aren't twenty miles off", "Go on, leave me", the two daughters going suddenly, not looking back, and the old man sitting there and sobbing, without tears, the bullet-holes, could they be?, in a car, the women jumping out and running into shops, the faces, grey, slippery, the drops of sweat, the "Rest, let me rest", the eyes, the eyes . . . the eyes. . . .

At last a break. Rousing herself, she scurried across the road. She must get home. The worst shock was to come —

it was convenient to buy the bread last of all — she saw her baker, M. Auget, putting up his shutters. He was still in the doorway. "I kept a loaf for you," he said reassuringly, "they cleaned me out."

"But — what does it mean?"

M. Auget shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know? It seems they're moving house up there. We must listen to the wireless."

"The wireless!"

"Yes, I know, I know. But what else have we?"

In her own street, the women who had not been so far as the High Street looked at her curiously. Had the daughter-in-law . . .? Was it the son . . .? She stopped to speak to two of them. In talking, she made the most of the stupefying scene, and as little as possible of the panic fermenting in her stomach. She even laughed. . . . "My goodness, if I were going to run away I shouldn't choose our big clock to lug round with me!" The others nodded. Forming in each mind — no, in each body — the seed of panic, words. . . . What should I take? linen? my wedding-dress? the silver tea-pot? . . .

Towards half-past nine Bergeot was driving in from the Manor House. His car had only to turn into the High Street at one point and leave it again after twenty yards. But at the end of every side street a little eddy of cars pushed desperately against the main current. Bergeot got out to look. At this side, there was no shade, the sun fell on the traffic and assassinated it; what seemed delirious cries came from some of the cars, others were quiet, shut up like one of those tombs where the survivors arrange a vase, a few photographs, a chair; in the unshaded carts women sat bowed in the heat; the children, fallen sideways, lay like dead; a voice — "Jean, keep your hat, you'll get your death in this sun"; a military ambulance rang its bell without stopping, frantic — "Can't you clear these damned people off the roads? I have badly wounded men in here. Which way is the hospital?" Which way is Saintes? Royan? Angoulême? Niort? Bordeaux? "Try to sleep a little, Madeleine."

At his wit's end, the policeman on point duty had given up struggling; for long minutes the only movement was the ripple of panic starting somewhere at the back, in the country, and dying away in Seuilly High Street in a gasp, a hand clutching the reins tighter, a child throwing his arm

over his head, with a poor little scream — “ Be quiet, Louis, they won’t come here.”

A man seized Bergeot’s arm and shook it, stammering. “ You see ? You see it ? You. Look at it, Mr. Prefect ! Look at it. My God, and this is what you want us to go through. This is your war.”

He recognised a wine-grower whom less than a fortnight ago he had persuaded to organise civil defence in his canton. This man was one of his triumphs, he and Lucien had chuckled over him. And here he was, blaming Bergeot not only for the war, but for the shock he felt seeing this fear stretched, congealed, along the road. The Prefect tried to rally him. It was no good. “ You,” he kept saying, “ you.” White with anger or panic, or with both together, he left Bergeot suddenly, and ran back the way he had come. No doubt he was going home to consult his wife or his banker. Bergeot shrugged his shoulders. But he was taken aback. He decided to walk to the Prefecture, and told his chauffeur to bring the car on when he could.

Looking down from the terrace of the Prefecture, across the Loire veiled by eddies of light, the roofs, the spire of the Abbey Church, brittle, curling away from a sky pale with heat, he assured himself that by now the street was clear again, there had been an accident on the roads south of Seully which was holding everything up. . . . The noises of panic did not reach up here. . . . But where had this human lava come from ? — and those eyes stunned by the heat ; he had never looked at so many eyes, so much fear. Why hadn’t he been warned ? There were telephones, there were prefects and sub-prefects and secretaries, there were mayors. . . . Lucien came out. He said that the Mayor had just arrived and wanted to see him before the Defence Committee.

The Prefect felt a burden snatched from him. Nothing to do with the refugees, for the moment he forgot them ; it was simply that Labenne had arrived expecting the Committee to meet on the day arranged at the previous meeting. . . . During the night Bergeot had started awake with the crushing certainty that it would not meet, there would be no Committee this or any other morning, Thiviers and the rest would ignore it. He lay awake for an hour, sweating with the humiliation.

What an ass I was, he thought, smiling. The relief drove

him almost to shake hands with Labenne. Not quite. . . . He was bitterly ashamed of this instinct which could make him, for a moment, feel he ought to flatter Labenne.

"What is it you want?" he said stiffly.

Labenne had caught sight of the impulse. It strengthened his own — part pity, a larger part calculation — to make use of Bergeot by offering to save him. And it doubled his contempt for the Prefect. I can abuse him, he said to himself, I can threaten his precious Madame de Freppel — and he thinks of making friends with me! . . .

For once he was making a mistake. Bergeot had been made a fool of by his strongest habit; he was only all the more wary. He allowed Labenne to talk at length and explain that he had not been threatening, only warning; the very last thing he wanted was to make a scandal or injure anyone, he was only anxious to be helpful, he had hurried here this morning for that. It was as simple and clear as day. Bergeot must be eager to save Seuilly from a useless horror; no doubt by now he had had instructions from the Ministry; it was certain that the armistice was a matter of days . . . of hours . . . and the approach of the Germans. . . . "After all, we both came from the people, there's less difference between a village butcher and small farmer and the village tax-collector than there is between either of us and a man like Thiviers — or a caricature like our deputy. How much better we shall be able to deal with the Germans if we present a front!" Labenne paused: he wanted to emphasise his next words. "With your official sources of information. . . ."

"In short," Bergeot said coolly, "you're inviting me to help you in cutting up Seuilly among the Boches when they get here. Thanks for treating me as if I were one of your friends. It's something to remember. You can be quite sure I shall remember it!"

Excited by his contempt for Labenne, above all by his pleasure in showing it, he missed the hatred which Labenne was not able to keep out of his eyes. Bergeot should pay him for that grain of pity! . . . He controlled himself and smiled. . . . If Bergeot had been a little less human in his contempt, he might have remembered that an enemy moved by vanity is implacable. Labenne had been far less dangerous when he was an enemy only from self-interest — which changes so easily. Possibly, if he had thought of this, he would have acted differently during the next two days. It

does some people good to know they are lost : Émile Bergeot had always been at his best when he felt least hope.

The door opened. Bergeot stiffened himself to greet the two generals and Thiviers. That they had come doubled his triumph over Labenne. . . . What a solemn fool Thiviers is, he said to himself. And Woerth, marching beside Piriac as though he were pushing a wooden giant in a carnival. He was amusing himself with these insults to money and power while he held Piriac's chair for him and smiled with a delicate reserve at Thiviers.

When they were seated, Thiviers looked round and said, "Where is our deputy ? I understood from him that he was coming this morning."

"He was," Bergeot retorted. "And yesterday evening I invited him to stay away. Surely you saw his article in the *New Order* ?"

"Was it — objectionable ?"

"If you object to treason ! The first part suggests that we are beaten, the second, pretending to be a eulogy of Marshal Pétain, swallows him only to throw him up again looking ridiculous. That's an old trick of his. If Master Huet had been Judas — he couldn't have resisted such a chance — he would never have hanged himself, not he ; he would have spent his thirty pieces and the rest of his life in slandering the disciples. . . . I've sent the article to the Minister. It's time Huet was locked up."

He looked at Thiviers with a slight smile, challenging him to defend Huet. Thiviers lowered his eyes and did not speak. Labenne said drily,

"Your eloquence, Mr. Prefect, is deadly. Huet is no more."

"I never liked him," Piriac murmured. "He looks like a fox. . . . When I was in Washington, they invited me to hunt a fox. It was rather amusing."

Outwardly calm, Bergeot was exultant. I can do anything with them, he said to himself ; I can leave Labenne to hang himself, as he will — without my taking the trouble to suspend him. . . . He even persuaded himself that Thiviers's silence was friendly. . . . He was going to go on speaking ; but Piriac, making one of his minute tremendous movements, said,

"Gentlemen, it is useless for us to sit here discussing. Everything has broken down. When I came into the High

Street this morning—" He could not go on. His voice, momentarily strong, failed him completely. An emotion which must have been the strongest of his life distorted his mouth. Bergeot was alarmed. He thought the old general was going to have a stroke. That would be too much — positively indecent. But Piriac still sat upright, showing no signs of collapse except the ceaseless trembling of an eyelid. Bergeot said hurriedly,

"I agree with you, General. It's a horrible sight. I shall take measures at once. In the meantime, you can see for yourself how urgent it is to prevent a panic in Seuilly. The mere sight of these unfortunate people—" If they moved your hardened nerves, he thought, forgetting that the harder the nerves the greater the weakness. "Since you wished it I gave up my civil volunteers. But our people must be given something to do. I propose to set them to work for the refugees, they can open places for them to rest — and so on——"

Labenne interrupted quietly. "Surely all these calls to arms will create the very panic you want to avoid?"

"I agree with the Mayor," Thiviers said. "And if he, who is also responsible for the town. . . ."

Piriac moved his head. "Everything is finished," he lamented, "my worst fears have been confirmed by these wretched people — homeless, leaderless. But I knew it already."

He is really senile, Bergeot thought, with impatience. "Yes, yes, General," he said respectfully, "but we must do what we can to restore order — at least in one Department."

Labenne leaned forward to speak into Piriac's face. "The town will be clear by this afternoon," he said, "it's only a temporary dislocation."

"Do you think so?" Piriac said.

"I swear it."

At this moment Bergeot was seized by one of those intuitions which always dazzled him — because they offered a comparatively easy way out of a problem. Although time and again they had led him into difficulties far greater than those he wanted to escape, he continued to trust them: they flattered his belief in his subtlety. Better still, they were an outlet for his energy and a chance to act instead of waiting. . . . He believed he had guessed Labenne's deepest and secret motive — a savage jealousy. . . . He has always been

jealous of me, of my success, my energy, my power. . . . Everything fell into its place in the light of this blinding intuition. Labenne had bought the *New Order* to use it against him, not for any political reason. His opposition was due wholly to envy — and not to the treacherous motives that Mathieu, the fool, thought he had discovered. . . . He felt an easy contempt for the Mayor.

"The German advance forces," Piriac was saying, "cannot be more than a week distant from the Loire, perhaps nearer. Monsieur Thiviers, in the event of a German occupation, you will tell your workers to keep calm and await orders."

Bergeot seized the chance to impress the soldiers with his energy. "But before the Germans could occupy Seuilly, you will have destroyed the aircraft works, and——" He was startled by a cry from Thiviers.

"Good God," Thiviers stammered, "are you mad? Do you want to ruin the town?"

Before Bergeot could retort, General Woerth spoke for the first time. "Mr. Prefect, you can leave these measures to us."

Ah, I've trespassed on your authority, Bergeot said to himself. And your vanity. He was amused. . . . General Piriac took hold of his arm: in a bewildered voice, he said,

"Those unfortunate people. What is to be done? The chaos" — his voice strengthened — "the country's awful need for discipline and faith . . ."

"Its immediate need is peace," Woerth said drily. "In my opinion, the war was lost a month ago, on May the fifteenth. Now we have to face the social effects of defeat. A wise leader would be considering how to strengthen patriotism, silence men of ill-will, and revise the constitution. His plans ought to be ready to put into effect without delay after the armistice."

There speaks the political general, Bergeot said to himself. Monsieur Woerth, you could be very dangerous. If I were Minister of the Interior, I should keep my eye on you. . . . He had detected as well a note of regret and bitterness. After all, Woerth was a soldier, he had the loyalties and narrow pride of a soldier. He could hardly be enjoying the thought of a German occupation.

"General Woerth, may I, without vexing you again," he said, "make a comment?"

"Why not?"

"Seuilly is full of troops — and tanks. It would, wouldn't it, be possible to fight a delaying action here?"

"Yes," Woerth said coldly, "it would be possible. All sorts of useless actions are possible in war."

"It would be useless?"

Piriac had another access of energy. "For a weak country, all avoidable bloodshed is useless."

"Think what would happen if Seuilly were bombed this morning," Thiviers murmured.

"Or any other morning," Labenne said.

Ignoring them, Bergeot turned to Woerth. "I'm not rash enough to argue with you. But surely *you* are being a little rash in taking the end of resistance for granted? Surely it's possible that you will be forced to defend Seuilly . . .?" "Am I, he wondered, speaking for myself or Mathieu? "And the bare possibility is reason enough for sending the children away — if only to prevent their parents rushing on to the roads with them!"

Thiviers lifted his hands. "I disagree," he cried in a shocked voice. "Children ought not to leave their parents."

"As mayor, I will have nothing to do with any such criminal and fantastic plan," Labenne said, with energy. "If your sole object is to spread terror in the Department, you couldn't think of a quicker way to do it."

"General Woerth——" Bergeot began.

Woerth did not allow him to speak. "Mr. Prefect, you have a great deal of energy. May I remind you that, like any other civilian now, you are subject to certain disciplines? It would be better for the Department if you had less anxiety to show off your talents and more judgement."

Labenne looked at Bergeot and smiled slightly.

The Prefect's intuition suddenly became ridiculous to him. He saw it as it was, a superb illusion of his own vanity, the most dazzling, the most fatuous, of his whole life. Perhaps the most fatal. . . . His exultance had been so unreasonable that he tumbled the harder. He felt giddy. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he covered his eyes with his hand. . . . What Labenne wanted — and possibly Thiviers — was nothing less than to keep Seuilly in a state of feverish disorder. They were deliberately courting panic. Why?

In his new clarity he saw, without any excitement, that

he must openly attack Labenne. Insult him. Make him give himself away. . . . Straightening himself, he glanced at Thiviers.

Looking away from him at once, Thiviers said, "I have supported our Prefect for many years. I may say that I am not without responsibility for his career. It grieves me sincerely to withdraw — as I must — all support in the future."

No one spoke. Bergeot had time to feel his isolation. He had sometimes boasted of it, but this was the first time he knew fully what it meant to a public man to have no one at his back, no party, no interest, and now no powerful friend. He felt a horrible weakness. His mind intrigued madly, seeking a way out for him.

This first moment of complete isolation was also the last when he saw clearly that he ought to denounce Labenne and Thiviers in such terms that the issue between them and him was unavoidable and naked — and would have to be settled by his disgrace or theirs. For a moment he saw this. He saw what he must say. And the sarcasm and bitterness he must use. . . . His mind clouded. How to protect Marguerite? How be certain that if he were going to be disgraced for sending money abroad, Thiviers would share his disgrace . . .? He looked up, and saw that the others were waiting for him to speak. He said nothing. I must think, he said to himself; I must have more time to think.

This wise thought was an enormous relief to him. He did not know that it was also, and with more reason and a precise un pitying force, sentence passed on him — and his last choice.

Woerth leaned forward and touched Piriac's arm.

"You want to get back," he said in a clear voice.

Piriac rose at once. "Yes, yes, of course. . . . Those lost people," he muttered. "And think that the Germans are entering Paris this morning." He turned his back on the Prefect.

"Monsieur Bergeot," Woerth said, "the commander-in-chief and I came here this morning at the urgent request of Monsieur de Thiviers. You will not expect to continue the farce of these meetings, I think."

He followed Piriac out of the room, guiding him deftly by an elbow: he must have been used to blind men. Bergeot watched them go without speaking. He was so deeply

mortified that he did not show it. When the generals had left he turned to Thiviers and said calmly,

"I realise that if I am too active in trying to keep order in Seully, you will make difficulties for me."

To his surprise, Thiviers said, "My dear fellow, you're mistaken. I don't approve of your plans, in my opinion they're ill-judged, but I have every sympathy for you. I shall consider what I can do to help you."

The Prefect felt a weak thrill of hope. He did not allow it to show in his face, but instead of bowing stiffly to Thiviers, as he had intended, he held his hand out. The banker's long fingers pressed his lightly.

Labenne had watched. He was standing with legs apart, balancing his thick body. There was no life in his eyes, not even a breath of malice. He looked like a bailiff come to value the furniture of the room before seizing it. Bergeot felt sure he was meditating a last stroke. But when it fell, it was only an attack on his vanity.

"Perhaps Monsieur de Thiviers and I made a mistake — in deciding to let you hold one more of your little Committees. I can't say it's been a success."

"The intention was kind," Bergeot said, smiling. "Thank you very much."

He saw them to the door, and had enough calmness left to tell Lucien not to disturb him. Then he sat down and gave himself up to a feverish search for expedients.

He realised, with irony, that his unfortunate Committee had never even been necessary. He had created it solely to glorify himself in the eyes of Piriac and the others.

Outside the Prefecture, Labenne was mildly surprised to see Colonel Rienne.

"Mr. Mayor," Rienne said gravely, "I hope you won't waste any time before making some reassuring statement to the townspeople."

"About what?"

"But you've seen these wretched people who have been allowed, heaven knows why, to take to the roads? Unless something is done at once, Seully people may join them."

"And what do you advise me to say?" Labenne said, with an insolence he was clumsy enough to mark by yawning.

"I don't intend to teach you your business," Colonel

Rienne answered. He went into the Prefecture.

Labenne glanced at Thiviers, who was smiling. "I see you're amused," he said drily, "Would you, I wonder, be as amused if the army mutinied and our brave officer came to arrest you? . . . Don't worry. I have my eye on Colonel Rienne for you. . . ."

Bergeot heard Rienne's voice, and the excuses of his secretary. He rang his bell. "Send Colonel Rienne in to me, you know I'm always ready to see him." In the moment before his friend came into the room, he looked in the mirror and was pleased by his reflection. He was pale and haggard. Bonamy would see that he had been fighting.

Rienne looked at him and said coolly, "You have a chance to put all your civil defence schemes into effect — in dealing with the refugees. I'll give you any help you want. If I post men to direct them off the main street, will you arrange that they're given help of some sort? It's perfectly obvious that Labenne intends to do nothing."

"And what can you do?" Bergeot said drily. "You're not the commander-in-chief."

"Not yet," Rienne laughed. "But I have my modest powers. They don't, though, stretch so far that I know why hordes of civilians are being allowed to stravage about France——"

Bergeot interrupted him. "I can tell you that the civil administration of half the country has broken down. My dear Bonamy, I saw the Prefect, yes, the Prefect of the A—— in that mob. I don't imagine he's the only one. . . . For the past three hours my secretary has been trying to put a call through to Bordeaux to the Ministry."

"You had better have been doing something useful," Rienne said.

Bergeot pressed his hand on his forehead. Through all his annoyance with Rienne, he saw him with a strange clearness: his energy, taking refuge in his mind, was trying to make sure that if he ruined himself through weakness or lack of judgement, he did it with his senses at their most acute. He saw that his foster-brother was a point in the French line; infinitesimal as it was, he was holding it with all those qualities of the French people which go best in pairs: gaiety and the stubbornness which rarely becomes fanaticism, the caution and logical acceptance of risk, the coolness hiding its grain of warmth, the refusal of injustice forming itself

slowly in a strong patience, the good humour and mockery, the generosity and shrewd calculation ; all the faults and virtues which a long endurance of pleasure and misery, a clear air, and an exquisite balance of climate can bring to their term in a people — with the added benefit of a restless greedy neighbour.

“ You’re my only friend,” he said slowly.

Rienne smiled slightly. “ What can I do to help ? ”

“ Nothing. Nothing at all.”

In the very moment of speaking, he reached the irrational certainty that Thiviers was still his friend. Obstinate, blind and deaf to everything that could deny it, he chose to believe in Thiviers’s good will. . . . At least he’ll approve if I deal firmly with the refugees. . . .

“ Listen, Bonamy,” he said, with energy, “ I shall do everything possible.”

Rienne frowned. “ It’s the impossible that’s needed.”

“ I’ll do that, too,” Bergeot smiled. “ I’ll use everything and everybody I can lay hands on. Surely you didn’t think I was going to perch up here admiring the country ? What a day, though. This morning at the Manor House I could smell the vines.”

He saw, without realising that it was because he had admitted spending the night with Marguerite, that Rienne was hesitating. Putting an arm round him, he shook him gently. “ You old idiot,” he said lovingly, “ go away and let me get on with it. I’ll keep in touch with you.”

Chapter 69

THE heat of mid-afternoon, in the sunless angle of the barracks, laid a heavy hand on Piriac, on his old eyelids and the back of his neck. Sitting with head bent forward, and half-closed eyes, he was not listening to the talk between Woerth and M. de Thiviers. But sometimes a word or a sentence brushed him. He was, he thought, leaning on the wall of the square at Bourg, looking down on the Dordogne where it left the Gironde : children were playing about in

the shadow of the church behind him, their feet rolling the gravel made a sound which pleased him dearly, though he had forgotten that it reminded him of the barracks ; he felt young ; a long way below him, at the foot of the cliff, the river was untroubled until one of two voices said, "The Germans have broken through in Alsace, near Colmar." Alsace, he thought, seeing only the Gironde ; a shadow raised mountains in it, it was level with the wharves, a gull flying inland cut livid marks with its off wing. . . . I'm asleep, he thought, forcing his eyelids to open. He saw Thiviers sitting between him and the light. The banker's face had its usual look of self-assured patience, as though he knew the right thing to do always and would do it in spite of calumny. That man, he thought, is a diplomat, no, he is a scoundrel, no, he is good. . . . Thiviers disappeared ; and Piriac gave himself up to the warmth and the smell of dust and old stones. Shall I go home now ? he thought, seeing the sky, the steep road, the limes planted by his grandfather. The bees had been droning in his ears for several minutes before he noticed the limes. . . . "It would be better if the Prefect resigned," Woerth said : "it says everything about the corruption of society that he is respected in the town. If he were arrested there might be trouble. . . ." "Not if we were able to wait until after the armistice. . . ."

Piriac's mind opened like a pair of compasses, and formed a vault. A dead soldier lying there on his back, hands in his stomach, was as little impressive as a rag dropped in a field. . . . He saw Thiviers again. Looking dejected and grave, "Leave it to me," he was saying, "I can persuade him to resign—and before the Germans arrive. I must say that that alarms me far more. Are you sure there will be no incidents ? No attempts at resistance ?"—"You can leave that to me," Woerth said : he spoke with a coldness which would have mortified anyone except Thiviers.

Although he did not understand what they were talking about, Piriac saw that his chief of staff had been vexed. He felt pleased. He's a conceited fellow, too clever by half, he thought : I must keep an eye on him. But the warmth, and the lime trees so alive with bees that it sounded like the endless distant murmur of heavy guns, pressed his head down on to his chest. Rest, he said to himself, rest ; I must rest. . . . Suddenly, a flash from one of the guns. He

opened his eyes. "What they don't realise," Thiviers said, "is the cost of mechanising an army. We never had the money."

"All the same, it might have been better to find it," Piriac said.

He saw, with satisfaction, that he had startled them. They looked at him, the banker inquisitively, Woerth with that reserve which was less caution than pride. Piriac felt absurdly happy. . . . Ah, they thought I was asleep. . . . He moved his arm, over the Dordogne, over the Gironde, bringing it back to lie on the table, the wrinkled palm of the hand upwards, empty. I shall be blamed for losing them, he thought, troubled.

Woerth spoke to him. Vexed, he said,

"What's that? Speak up, my boy. I can't hear you for the noise . . . the bees. . . . What is it?"

"I was only reminding you, sir, that I'm flying to Bordeaux this afternoon."

"Oh? Why?"

"You agreed yesterday, sir, that we ought——"

Piriac cut him short. "Nothing of the kind," he said, suspicious. His mind had cleared; he remembered with a dry malice that Woerth was in the habit of finding himself at G.H.Q. when decisions were being made. With such excellent habits, an officer can go far. He's too ambitious, Piriac thought: he meant that at sixty-four Woerth was young enough to be a danger to his seniors. . . . Why is he so anxious to be in Bordeaux? What does he hope the Government will do for him?

"I shall go myself," he thought aloud. "I shall see Pétain——"

He was alert enough to see the fury in Woerth's glance before it was masked. The door opened. An officer came in with one of the slips of paper on which telephoned and wireless messages were written — he had made it a rule that they must be written out, signed, and countersigned, before he would notice them. He took the paper and held it between his hands for a minute before he looked at it. Verdun had been taken.

"Verdun," he said, looking at Woerth.

He was terribly distressed. What has happened? he said to himself; what have I done? . . . The Dordogne rushed away from him; where it met the Gironde he heard con-

fusedly the sound of bullets rippling through branches. He knew Verdun well, he could find his way about the fort, the tunnels, but when he thought of it he saw the square at Bourg, the white-hot sky, the old shuttered houses and their burden of poverty, malice, hope. He could hear an aeroplane. Or is it my heart beating? he thought. Am I going to die?

Woerth asked him if he felt ill. He shook his head, he was angry, his heart beating quickly now with dislike of Woerth.

"Go to Bordeaux," he growled. "Go. You may get something."

But this is the end, he thought. . . . He felt lighter and cooler. He could hold his eyes open. He was alone in his room, the other two had gone: he noticed that the light coming through the shutter had moved, trying from another angle to force this room where for twenty years, the lifetime of a recruit of this war, he had held out against all forms of change, against the most seemingly innocent — punishing a servant who altered the position of a chair — as rigidly and intolerantly — refusing to read newspapers in case he stumbled on a sentence shocking to his belief in an absolute monarchy — as against the appalling proposal that a soldier going up to attack should carry less on his back.

This time, he thought, I've really been asleep. He pulled himself up. . . . If Verdun has fallen, everything is finished, it will be impossible to save the army; but by the grace of God we shall save France. . . .

Colonel Rienne came in. Would he see the Bishop of Seuilly, who was outside in his car, waiting?

"Of course. At once."

He waited with a quiet pleasure. The bishop was his oldest friend, born in the same month of the same year, 1870, and only a few miles from Bourg. They were school-fellows in Bordeaux. When, once a week, they met to play chess, they moved easily and happily in a past which was at the same level for both of them: the quays, the bridge, the port, were not smaller or older for one, and when Piriac, as he did during every visit to his house near Bourg, went into Bordeaux, he could be sure that the sudden gaiety he felt crossing a street where one day he had burst a balloon directly behind an old colonel, or in front of the shop where he bought pencils and ices, belonged just as much to his

friend. It was very comforting. It took away part of the anguish of growing old — when you have to sit silent, or try, uselessly, to explain why some words, the word sunflower, for instance, or the word reverie, make you uneasy or senselessly happy. Yesterday, his sister had sent him a photograph of the Place des Quinconces in Bordeaux, taken in 1882. Smiling to himself, he took it out of his pocket and laid it face down on the desk. It would be a delicious surprise for his friend. . . . The bishop's first words ruined it.

"My dear friend, good of you to see me. I wanted to tell you, myself, that I shall do everything a very old priest can, to help you to resist the Germans. When do you expect them?"

Folding his hands, he spoke as though he were asking about the arrival in Seuilly of a Minister who wanted to place one of his week-end speeches at a point half-way between the shopkeepers of Paris and the wine-growers of Guyenne. Piriac was disconcerted, then sad. A fear, vague still, crossed his mind, that for the first time in more than seventy years he was going to have to change his habits — the way he walked, an arm and clenched fist behind his back, his trick of sleeping on his right until midnight and on his left from midnight until he woke at five o'clock.

"Resist?" he said slowly. "There's no question of resistance. But you can certainly help me by telling people how to submit. You'll like that," he added cunningly, "you, a bishop."

The bishop scarcely moved his body, but he was no longer leaning in his chair. "Submit to the Germans? You're not serious?" he said in a placid voice. "Why, my dear Eustache, I'm prepared, not to fight, I'm a year or two too old for that, but I shall be wherever your front line is, to give the help I can."

"It's useless," Piriac said. "This time they're too strong."

"Nonsense!"

Piriac was vexed. He was still standing up; he sat down in front of his friend, so that they would be looking from the same height at the past, this time of France.

"How many times have we fought the Germans?" he said with simplicity and a little anger. "You ought to know. Don't you remember your first essay for Father Bouriac? — it began, *The chariots of the yellow-haired*

Teutons crossed the Rhine in cohorts, as the Romans say ; they went back, as we say in my village, without stopping to bow." This cleared off his anger. " Keeping the Germans out was never easy," he said calmly, " even with Louis the fourteenth; he last three times have been terrible. They've grown too strong for us to hold. If we had beaten them this time, would anyone have helped us to burn the root of the evil ? You and I know both what that is, Father Bouriac explained it to us in the fourth ; that passion of the Germans for unity, which must cover up a singular disorder, since each German takes so much trouble to behave like all the others. Or, as you would say in your village, to pluck the same hen. . . . And in twenty, in ten years' time, when they marched on us again, who would have helped us ? Who has helped us this time, has even God helped us ? Has there been another miracle of the Marne ? No, no, it's an old soldier, it's your friend Eustache Piriac who is talking to you, and I say that the frontier against Germany can't be held any longer. The dust of that past of France must be almost all human. It's gone on too long. It's time we and they ended it. France can do with new blood — and goodness knows they can do with a little civilisation. Yes, my word, it's time for that ! Together, France and Germany together, we shall be unconquerable. It will be a Fourth Empire — for us both."

He believed what he was saying, but he was not saying all he believed. He watched anxiously : if his friend agreed, he would make some sign before speaking, he would lift one eyebrow, or crack the joints of his left hand — two signals they used when an exasperated master made them sit at opposite ends of the class-room.

After a minute's silence his friend smiled maliciously.

" But your Fourth Empire won't be French," he said. " You can't really believe they'll leave us our bread and wine — they won't like the taste of it." Still smiling, he quoted, " *Gloire à notre France éternelle !* " . . . "

Without hesitating for a second — hadn't they learned it together, under the admirable Father Bouriac ? — Piriac rushed ahead of him. " *Gloire à ceux qui sont morts pour elle !* " . . . Shall I repeat the whole poem ? — I can," he boasted.

" If you want to," the old bishop said drily. " It's your last chance. The Fourth Empire will certainly cut Hugo out of its text-books."

Piriac's arm dropped. "Yes, yes," he muttered, "but what can I do ? "

"Resist."

"What would be the good ? "

The bishop looked at him. "That I should have to tell a soldier what it is a people learns by resisting ! " he said sadly.

He rose to go. Although he was disappointed that his surprise had fallen flat, Piriac held out the photograph. And it worked. Smiling with grief, with joy, with longing for a province his spirit had never left, the bishop looked at it carefully. He pointed out in a corner two nearly invisible figures, which could at will be two twelve-year-old school-boys carrying their satchels. Piriac's happiness was at its height.

"But of course they are us ! Look at your blouse, torn as usual."

"How delicious Bordeaux was that year," the bishop said. "Do you remember the scent of limes on the Quai Richelieu in June ? It smells of petrol now."

"Everything was better then," Piriac said, "even the mulberries tasted better."

His friend reminded him of a poor little vineyard near Bourg, which they had thought glorious, because they were allowed to help in August. But after a time Piriac began to feel that they were talking about two different vineyards, not about the one he would recognise by its scent from all the other hundred vineyards of the district ; and then that they were not talking about the same France. He made his friend look again at the photograph of the Place des Quinconces, and stooped over it with him. But he imagined now that while he had been looking only at the trees and the monument the bishop was staring obstinately at the port. He tried without a word to make him look round. It was no use. Snatching the photograph, he put it in his pocket. Another second and the two indistinct figures would have separated, one going home by the embankment and the other past the theatre and the shops. I couldn't bear that, he thought sadly.

He sat down heavily and closed his eyes. Best not look, not think. When he roused himself, his friend had gone.

Chapter 70

DURING the night and early morning the Germans crossed the Seine at Melun, attacked violently in Champagne, pushed their light forces to the Saône, the Aube, the Yonne. They were not amusing, these light forces. In the early hours as at midday they weighed terribly on the dry soil, the blackened stones and wood ash, the trees crushed at the side of the road, and on the backs of children. It was not a picnic, the bread and cherries eaten in a ditch, suddenly swelling between tongue and throat when the horizon began its stammer. The child calling on the ground to hide it . . . sometimes had its wish. The day, strengthening, brought with it a darkness of its own, a darkness full of flashes between the eyeballs and the hand pressing on them. Fear had become an element in everything, in the single young leaf falling, loosed by the shrapnel, the ears of corn eaten by caterpillar wheels, the cart overturned at a cross-roads, the deserted places where women had washed clothes, the hayrick on fire in broad daylight, no one putting it out, the rooms where women and old men listening to the wireless repeated the names — "Sens — Troyes — Dijon — no, they can't be coming so near as that. And my niece at Sens—"

Marguerite pressed her hands on her eyeballs and tried to pray. She found that it is harder to pray first thing in the morning, the house stretching itself, the sun quarrelling outside with the Loire. She was distracted, and she could not feel easy in making promises for the future while with the livelier part of her mind she was planning the indocile now. No more than a traveller looking over the steely roughness of waves believes in the colour and smoothness of hills docile in sunlight on the other side of the bay. If she might lie, trick, seduce, for a few more days, she would ever after be good and simple. But this is not a prayer. Even the petitioner feels no confidence in it. It might even bring bad luck.

Ashamed and impatient, she stood up, determined to waste no more time. She was in black, because Thiviers once said that only a skin of clear amber could support a black without light in it. She had not made a clear plan :

she still hoped to find some way of subduing him that would not humble her too much. Subdue him she must, whatever the means. It ought not to be difficult, he was neither flippant nor experienced. But she felt uncertain.

Even during the moments of crushing sunlight between her car and the orangery, where Thiviers wrote in summer, she felt cold and trembled. As soon as she saw him — as soon as she walked from the wings on to the stage — her confidence revived. Fortunately, she could not know that in Thiviers's eyes her own image of herself was dulled by an inner shadow. She is showing her age, he thought.

He felt satisfaction, pity, surprise. "Why have you come to see me?"

"To tell you that you were right."

He tried to see the thoughts in her eyes. It was like looking at the reflections in wet sand — an illusion of depth and light, and no depth, no light. "Right?"

"About the war. About Émile."

"Ah." He could not resist this cry of triumph. At the same time he was watching her closely, and he did not detect any annoyance. It made him suspicious. To be guarding herself with so much care — she must be very anxious.

"You didn't come here only to tell me that."

She looked at him with a noble candour. She seemed a little confused. With the hand lying on the table she twisted her handkerchief. But, he thought, she never makes clumsy gestures. She is lying. . . .

"Of course not. I came — to ask you to help me."

"But what did you think I could do?"

"How do I know? You always seem able to do anything you want to. And you can read the future——"

Without giving him time, she knelt beside him and rested an arm on his knees, taking both his hands. Hers were cold and dry, but they gave him an impression of feverish weakness. He felt an extreme grief and triumph. He was not in love with her. What he felt was compassion. It was compassion beating in his wrists, scorching the back of his eyelids, pinching him, confounding his head and nerves. It was his mind that felt, while his nerves, suffering every form of logic and concept, proved to him with words like appearance, belief, truth, that he had grown out of his infantile desires, and desired only — what? To show his compassion — by touching her, by rolling her between himself

and the floor, by laughing, by giving way to tears. There are so many ways, sly or violent, of showing compassion. He freed one of his hands and touched her hair, then the base of her throat.

He felt her revulsion. It was immediate and unwilling. Her will fought against it. For several seconds she tried to endure his hands. Her smile of pleasure became a grimace : he felt her fingers, then her arms, then her whole body becoming rigid. When he took his hands away she got up quickly and clumsily — this time her clumsiness was certainly not deliberate — and backed away from him until she knocked against the desk, whimpered, and sat down in the nearest chair.

He had great difficulty in moving his tongue. "What possessed you?"

"I don't know."

"Nonsense." He walked towards her. "Of course you know. Tell me."

"I don't know," she repeated.

"You came here for help," he said, stooping over her. She must have thought he was going to touch her : leaning forward, she made an arch of her body.

"I came to ask you to save me," she said quickly. She hesitated.

"Well, go on." He moved his arm ; it was reflected in her face by the shadow of her revulsion moving across it.

"Don't touch me," she said, with fear. The pupils of her eyes disappeared upwards for a second. "You must help us. Now that I hope to have a child I intend to live differently — and I need to be safe."

He knew why she had told him. To protect herself against his compassion. She was no longer able to use her instincts to trick him and dominate him : they were using her. He felt a hateful satisfaction, and a bitterness he could not have endured if he had not turned it, instantly, to contempt. She is a loose woman, he said to himself : it would be wrong to let her off lightly ; a little punishment may make her repent.

"You have no right to children — a woman like you."

He saw that he had only succeeded in making her sorry for him. Smiling a little, she said,

"My poor Robert, you'll never forgive me for leaving you. But you ought to feel satisfied — you did everything

for me, turned my miserable scrap of money into a fortune, a small one by your standards, but still a fortune ; you managed my investments ; you do still. You gave everything and I nothing. Why can't you feel that all the credit is on your side and forgive me ? ”

At this moment he felt only hatred. “ Yes,” he said quietly, “ I could still ruin you.”

The threat gave her back her assurance. He watched it moving from her eyes to her hands ; they gave up fumbling for each other : tired, she settled herself in her chair like an old woman, too old to be in any danger. I never knew her, he thought, with despair.

“ What is it you really love ? Your money ? You have enough in America — if you can get there.”

“ I hope I shan't have to go to America,” she said quickly. “ Over there I should be nobody.”

“ It's that you want, is it ? You like to play at power ? I'm sorry for you, my dear. You won't be Prefect much longer. If you must have that sort of excitement, Émile is no good to you. He's finished.”

“ I don't believe it.”

She was disconcerted, but she had become sullen and obstinate. She is going to tell me the truth at last, he thought.

“ So you really care most of all for Émile ? ” he exclaimed. “ Do you want to save him from being shot by the Germans ? ”

“ I want Émile to go on living,” she said coldly. “ Myself, too, of course. And I want him to have a life, a position, where his energy and intelligence are used——”

Ah, he thought, despairing again, I shall never know whether your kernel is ambition or love ; or whether they are so grown together that neither alone is real. Looking at her, he saw that for the moment she was not thinking. She was watching him as a child watches grown-ups, trying to surprise in them the answer to some question it can't form clearly. Her eyes, too, like the eyes of a very young child, or an animal, were focussed on a point not on the surface of his face. At this moment she had an extraordinary innocence. Is she, he thought, still in some way innocent ? Anger cured his despair.

“ Do you think you have a right to happiness ? A woman like you ? ”

"It's because Émile and I have been happy together — in spite of my temper — that you disapprove of me. If I had been unhappy you would have less to say about my immorality. Or if you were capable of happiness yourself."

She was speaking calmly, almost without contempt. He saw that she was nearly exhausted. Her nostrils were pinched; she gave him the impression again of being much older than she was. He was startled to find himself thinking that she would die before he did — although no one knew better the toughness of her body, with its double joints. He felt real pity. It astonished him — and flattered him subtly. I'm not insensitive, he thought.

"My dear girl," he said warmly, "I can see one chance of helping you. Yes, yes, I know it won't be any use to you unless it helps Émile, too. I'm serious. If you can persuade him to resign at once, really at once, today, at the latest tomorrow, I promise you faithfully to look after him, and either bring him back when the country is quiet again, or find him some other foothold. . . . He can resign because of his health — a nervous collapse. . . . Don't interrupt me. I have only one condition. He must make a clean breast of all his foolish plans, so that they can be cancelled everywhere, and he must tell me — in confidence, of course, the names of all the persons who were most eager to help him. That's all."

At this moment he was sincere. He meant, if Bergeot would submit, to help him out — out of pity for her loss of her looks. Or simply out of pity. He was so confident that he could afford a disinterested emotion. "Do you agree?" he said gently.

She answered him at once. "Yes."

Now that he was kind she was afraid of offending him. She said anxiously,

"One of the most dangerous of Émile's friends is Rienne. Colonel Rienne. It was he made Émile arrest Derval. Did you know?"

"Yes, I knew."

She stood up. "You're being generous," she said stiffly. She was always ungracious when she had to thank someone for a kindness. It was as though she felt diminished by it. She was not generous enough to admire generosity when it descended on her.

Near the door of the orangery she stopped and looked at

him, this time directly in his eyes ; she was only anxious and tired. She asked,

“ And there will be peace ? ”

He smiled at her. “ Yes, yes, there will be peace.”

Stepping into the heat of midday, she put a hand over her eyes to shut out with her fear the blinding light.

Chapter 71

THIVIERS decided to see Bergeot at once. During the last few weeks he had dropped, one after another, all the pretences he had been holding between himself and the energetic successful Prefect. He had pretended that Bergeot feared to lose his friendship and help ; that he admired the triumphs of Bergeot's tact and energy, even though they were blows at his own influence in the Department : finest and most necessary of all his pretences, that he had forgiven him for taking Marguerite, and that on her part it was more self-interest than love — she had expected to marry Bergeot and make him an ambassador or a Minister. . . . Why all these pretences ? Because without them he would be at the mercy of his real feelings, a terrible thing for a man of his dignity and with his love of virtue. Terrible indeed. Now that he had admitted his feelings, he never knew what they would make him say when he was with Bergeot.

Just as he was leaving his house Dr. Charles-Gouraud arrived to see him. Dr. Charles-Gouraud was the physicist at the head of his celebrated laboratory, which cost him a great deal of money, and was worth to him every year half a dozen invitations from learned societies, to address them on the alliance between science and industry, or the metaphysics of finance ; and by which he hoped to be recognised one day as the French Rockefeller and apt to receive a Nobel prize. . . . He was surprised to see that Charles-Gouraud had come out, in this sun, without a hat, and even without putting down the things he was holding when the idea of calling on his employer seized him. He had a length of glass tube in one hand, and in the other a duster. He was wearing

list slippers. In this state he had walked at least a mile from the nearest tram. It was unusual. There had never been anything in his conduct to suggest that Charles-Gouraud would try to make himself famous as an eccentric. Correct in his dress, even elegant, with a precise way of speaking, and a distinguished record as a physicist, he had for Thiviers the great merit of being without personal ambition. And here he was, caught in the act of creating a legend.

"You had something to say to me?" Thiviers asked coldly.

The explanation was simple. For the past fourteen days Dr. Charles-Gouraud had been busy with a series of calculations which kept him at the laboratory all day and all night: he slept in an ante-room and had his meals brought in to him. None of his assistants had had the idea of talking to him about the war. His work finished, he glanced at a newspaper he found lying about and read the communiqué. The Germans, whom he had left a little over a fortnight ago at their old habit of fighting on the lower Somme, were nearing the Loire. He was stunned. He had in his laboratory an apparatus designed partly by himself and constructed at great cost — he usually spoke of it as "my wealthy god-child" — of the greatest, indeed of inestimable value, and unique. It must — it was the first thing he thought of when he had grasped the meaning of the communiqué, he put aside his delicate wife and his three daughters, whom he adored — he sent away at once, out of reach of the Germans; they have also a habit of theft, which they might not have changed. In his precise voice, unembarrassed by the objects he now discovered in his hands — "Witness," he said, smiling, turning the duster between his fine fingers, "my anxiety" — he explained that he would want packing-cases and a lorry. He would need two or three days to take the apparatus down and pack it with the care necessary. No doubt M. Thiviers would have no difficulty in providing the lorry. . . . Thiviers listened to him with impatience.

"I hadn't suspected you of being an alarmist," he said, smiling insolently. "When I can agree that any action is needed, I'll let you know."

He left the scientist standing, with his witnesses, and went out to his car.

At a crossing he was held up for twenty minutes by the traffic. On both sides of the street cars and tradesmen's

carts were standing against the curb ; running frantically between them and the houses, their owners threw in bundles with as little care for one that whimpered as for the bronze c Foch. It was as though in every house that morning, at the same moment, a woman had gone into her kitchen and seen death standing at the stove or the sink, or waiting patiently for the pan to boil. . . . Get out — before it moves. Better not know where you will sleep tonight than try to sleep in your own bed, with that downstairs. Better the roads, better the heat fastened as closely as a shroud, better anything than holding your breath, listening. . . . Has it moved ? Did you hear anything, didn't you hear it cough ? . . .

Thiviers watched, coldly at first, with the eye of the memorialist. It was as a chapter in his memoirs — the chapter Peace — that he read these hieroglyphs of panic. Then he saw a child put its hand out of a car as the door was pulled shut, trapping its fingers. The car had started : it travelled until it was held up in the stream before someone opened the door. He heard the child's cries above the delirium of gears and wheels. They upset him, they were no use even as a footnote.

He was calm when he reached the Prefecture. A pity that the end of the war and the beginning of peace were costing so much unhappiness, even pain. But it was the small change of history — paid and forgotten. He felt a quiet confidence, secure as he was in his cloak of history — lined with piety. Without giving Bergeot time to speak, he said,

" I imagined you would have resigned yesterday — after that unpleasant scene."

The Prefect looked at him with anger. " What scene ? What are you talking about ? "

" Surely you realise that you have no authority now ! You owe it to my influence that General Piriac hasn't had you arrested. I assured him you would resign at once."

As he spoke he had an orgasm of pleasure ; he trembled with joy, closing his eyes for a moment. When he looked at Bergeot again he saw that he was smiling.

" You must reassure him. I'm not going to resign."

Still trembling happily, Thiviers said, " You're forcing me to ruin you openly. How much respect will even your friends have for you when they hear the full story of your investments and your dollars ? "

Bergeot shrugged his shoulders. He was, Thiviers saw, in one of his moods of defiance, when anger — or wasn't it simply moral nihilism? — drove him against every instinct of self-preservation. He did not understand this side of Bergeot's nature. It irritated him to find himself faced by it when he had expected confusion and weakness.

"Do as you like," Bergeot said. "But do you realise what you're doing? There is not a single person in Seuilly, except myself, who can check the stampede which is beginning. People will believe me, me, if I tell them that they are safer in their houses than on the roads. I've talked on the telephone to every mayor, and I'm going to try what I can do in the town. I've had notices printed during the night——"

"You and your notices!" Thiviers felt only an intolerable anger. "You're stupid with vanity. If you weren't, you would see that you must resign. A message has gone to Grosdidier, recalling him. We have every confidence——"

"Grosdidier?" Bergeot said, with a coarse laugh. "He came back from Vichy yesterday — to collect his deed-box and his wife's clothes. He was in Seuilly an hour and left again at once. Your brave Grosdidier is not going to run any risk of meeting a German."

"It makes no difference——"

"Remove me," the Prefect went on calmly, "and you have removed the only restraining force in the town."

"The troops will do any restraining necessary," Thiviers exclaimed.

After a moment's silence, Bergeot said, without bitterness,

"So that's where we are. You've handed yourself over to Labenne. You'll regret it. He's used a great many beliefs, including socialism; he's used a great many persons, some very unsavoury; he'll use you. And when you've served him he'll kick you out. You don't know what you're doing, your treachery is the exalted kind which gets into history as a misguided idealism. Your victims, men without names, the men who only know how to turn a screw or prune vines, will have another name for it, possibly rough, certainly vulgar. But history is not written by victims."

Thiviers had recovered his self-control. He was even inspired. Nothing would have given him greater satisfaction

than to sit down at his desk and prove, against Bergeot, that innocence, when the State requires it, must suffer unjustly. What is justice? A word. A handsome white cloud. What is the State? Billions of francs' worth of soil, minerals, houses, banks, machinery, firmly anchored to a continent by the cables of ships. Only a fanatic for justice, like that wretched fellow Péguy, or a nihilist like Bergeot, would risk all this, and with it the cradles and heirlooms of the houses, the gold in strong-rooms, everything that was of value as well as everything that was gentle, modest, long-suffering, down to the last bottle of thin wine and the least bunch of dried herbs in a woman's poor cupboard, for a word, a cloud. If the chapter Peace could not be written without children fearing death — and getting their fingers crushed — then there must be fear — for as long as was needed to bring people to their knees — and deaths, as many as were needed, all anonymous. He felt himself firm, upright, pure — the only man who could make this clear to history. Men who turn screws and prune a vine have their uses, indispensable — which dispense them from trying to write history, or even reading it.

He looked placidly at Bergeot. "And I suppose you will consider General Piriac, when he gets rid of you to save Seuilly, a traitor."

"Not in the least," Bergeot said. "Neither he nor Woerth are traitors, they're ordinary generals — without the intelligence to imagine the sort of war this would be, or the heart to fight. Narrow poor heads and dry hearts."

But his defiance had become lifeless. He was at last feeling his helplessness and the awful weight of his errors. Thiviers saw it and rejoiced.

"You can do nothing," he said, smiling. "Far better resign quietly, without scandal — so that your friends will still be able to help you afterwards." He did not say: So that I can help you. He would save this humiliating promise until the Prefect was on his knees.

Bergeot did not answer. He seemed waiting, passively, for the future, his future, to take charge. Thiviers went on,

"And Marguerite? You don't imagine she wants to share your disgrace—?"

This time he had put his hand on the wrong words. He was unlucky. They loosed in him a bitterness, a rough jealousy, which numbed his will and forced him to cry,

"And another thing. You don't know her. You don't know that she was my mistress for three years; it was because I wanted to influence you through her — you were getting out of hand, with your imbecile notions — I set her on to you. You were my successor . . . as well as the clever nobody I helped — why did I help you? I thought you were a sensible man. . . . I don't want to touch politics myself. You were to be my voice and hand. You fool. I would have made you a Minister . . . Premier . . . why not?"

He stopped speaking. This was not giving him any pleasure. Even although he had not intended it, it should have been a delicious moment, another coupling of his joy and hate. He felt nothing. Nothing. Only vacancy. And a growing terror of this vacancy at the centre of his life. He was being allowed a brief moment of reality, but he could not bear it. It was a hell of dryness. Turning from it, he looked eagerly at the Prefect . . . another's reality is always bearable. He expected to see Bergeot's in his face, but it was placid, with the eyelids stretched like a bandage.

"Are you going to resign?" he asked.

"Why did you tell me this fantastic story?" Bergeot said.

"So that you would know what you're doing. For once — to have everything on the table."

He saw that Bergeot had believed him.

"I don't believe it," Bergeot said: "no woman could make herself live with you. Besides, you're impotent, aren't you? I've always supposed you were."

Strangely, Thiviers felt a pang of grief. "I've been kind to you. I've helped you in every way," he said.

He took the hat and gloves which Bergeot, with a polite smile, was handing to him. Not until he was going down the stairs, setting his feet carefully in the hollows worn in the stone, did a trembling rage get the better of his sadness.

Chapter 72

BERGEOT went out, saw that his notices were being posted, talked to people everywhere, with his own hands helped to unload a car into the house, for more than three hours ran here and there with mad energy, and came back to the Prefecture. Lucien told him that Mme de Freppel had telephoned several times; she wanted to see him at once. While his secretary was speaking, the telephone rang again. "Answer it and tell her I'm too busy, I'll come later."

Lucien listened and frowned. "It's the *New Order*," he said. "Derval himself. He says, is it true you're resigning? Will you speak to him?"

"Good God, is it my job to answer my telephone? Ask him where he heard such a stupid lie?" Bergeot said. He listened to Lucien talking in a severe voice.

"... Nonsense! ... You could at least give up wasting our time. ... Certainly not. Neither tomorrow nor any other day. ..." He put the receiver down, "I'm sorry, sir," he said, blushing. "Of course I know you don't talk to these people. It was just——"

"You're an idiot," Bergeot said affectionately, "an indispensable idiot. Get me a glass of coffee." He hesitated. "No, no, don't bother. I'm going out again." A moment earlier he had turned with a nervous horror from the burden of talking to Marguerite. Now it was the thing he must do at once. A crack had opened in his mind; into it were pouring his energy, wits, sanity itself. It must be closed—or he must be able to forget it.

It was a little easier to move in the High Street, but traffic was still coming thickly over the bridge. It now included army lorries and soldiers on foot. These were falling into the hands of the military police post at the end of the Quai d'Angers and being turned off to the barracks. Bergeot's car was held up while two enormous lorries were worked round the sharp turn. He saw a soldier drop over the back of the second and slip across the road. He recognised Marie's husband, Pierre. Breathless, Pierre came to a full stop beside the Prefect's car, hidden by it from the police. Bergeot spoke to him. Pierre glanced up, his mind absent,

showing only its white. He was covered with grey dust, and carrying his rifle. He seemed almost an idiot. A thin space opened between two cars : flattening himself through it, he disappeared. . . .

The river was fuller than it had been for weeks, and full of colour. During the afternoon a few clouds had come up. A pure white, they altered the colour of the water at several depths ; all the Loire's family of rivers might have been turning under and over between her banks like dolphins. Bergeot knew this road from his first day at school in Seuilly, when Bonamy brought him here. There was not a turn in it which had not the shape of one of his desires, as it came to him for the first time — or one of his faults. Today all he wanted from this stone and that elm was the assurance that he had not lost them.

When he came into her room he saw that Marguerite had been anxious. She was trembling with impatience, with nerves, with a feverish need to make him obey her quickly. . . . What has she decided I must do ? Run away ? . . . He kept back his new knowledge. Deliberately cruel, he wanted to keep a little longer this advantage he had over her. Besides, so long as he said nothing, he could believe he was calm.

She begged him to resign. All the arguments she had been joining together for hours fell on him at once. He felt bruised, but his mind was quite deaf. She saw he was not listening. In a gentler voice she asked him to put his ambition on one side for a time, for as long as his friends advised, and live, simply live. . . . " You still have something to live for. For our happiness, for the things we can enjoy together — the essay on Bergson you are always going to write, Mozart, the damson jelly you like. We'll live very simply, Sophie shall teach me to cook. And then our child."

He let her finish this little poem, and said coldly,

" My friends ? Thiviers, of course. It's true he was my friend before he was yours. But I believe you were more intimate with him."

She turned pale. The meaning of his words was too clear, even before she looked at him and his smile. He knew he was behaving badly in allowing himself such a smile, but he was suddenly full of pain. He wanted to ignore it. She was, he was pleased to see, in despair.

He waited a long time for her to find courage to speak. He saw her recovering, not from her despair, from the shock. Almost with pity, he saw her poor mind seeking a way out. Then he saw only himself and the injury to his pride. Was it his pride ?

" You let me talk to you about the child," she said with contempt. " How vile."

He did not answer.

" You haven't even asked me whether it's true. You've taken Thiviers's word, the word of a man who is determined to ruin you. He's always been jealous of you."

He felt almost too tired, of everything, to speak.

" Is it true ? "

" No. Of course not." She looked at him like a child proud of its courage. Her eyes gleamed. " I made use of him, of course. I flattered him shamefully. But why not ? I needed him. As for anything else " — her face changed, she smiled timidly ; her voice, that deep voice, vibrating at the base of her throat, lightly rough, gentle — " my love, you've known me for four years, you know all my ways and tricks — you know the truth about me."

It was the one thing he did not know. He was certain she was lying. She was too perfect in her part — voice, gestures, feelings, were a pinch of salt too moving. If she had not been acting, she would have made mistakes, chosen the wrong words. He felt it — without knowing how to reach in her her real feeling, how to get from her, even without words, her real voice. And he was tired, his mind dull and bored, his body broken.

Marguerite had touched him. Looking at her hand on his arm, he said mildly,

" How boring all this is. Why do you bother ? "

If he had shown any interest, if he had even been angry, she would have gone on denying with all the cunning and tenderness in the world, until he believed her because he wanted to. His indifference was too much. He saw her lose her courage, and with it her false honesty. Her eyes grew dull. Suddenly she began to talk without humility, without even any tenderness.

" You know nothing about my life. You think, because your father was a poor man, that you know something about poverty. It's not true. You were given an education, you had parents, friends. It's only your ambition that has made

difficulties for you. I had nothing. Do you understand ? Nothing." She hesitated, and said awkwardly, "I shan't try to make you believe me. You would never be fit to understand how, in my life, one mistake, one deceit, forced me to make others, one lie forced me to tell a hundred. When I married I thought all that was over. I was counting without myself. I was greedy and restless, I wanted so much to live, not to die of boredom in a house where everything, every gesture, was repeated at the same minute every day. It would have suited someone with no appetite for living ; but I, I was always so hungry. Thiviers was a way out — the only one. After all. . . . No, I'm not telling you the truth about myself. I'm trying to, but it's useless, I can't. I'm making excuses, I'm still lying. . . ."

"Don't," Bergeot said. He was full of pity for her, and for himself. And too done to help her.

"I love you so much," she said in a dry voice.

He knew this was true. He had never been so sure of her, never, as now, felt himself touching the solid and simple base of their "marriage". It was after all not unlike a marriage. It was full of disappointments, almost dull, and it was irreplaceable. But he felt this coldly, without any impulse to comfort her.

"I've quarrelled with Thiviers," he said. "I insulted him grossly."

"He'll punish you," she said with despair. "What did you say ?"

He made a vague gesture. "It was unforgiveable."

After a minute she said again, in the same almost unpleasant voice, "I really do love you. Do you believe me ?"

"Yes, yes," he said. He did not look at her.

"And it doesn't make any difference ?"

"Very little."

She waited a long time, two or three minutes. He did not move. He had never, he thought, known what it was to be tired. Marguerite got up and went into the next room. He heard a drawer opened. In the same instant he remembered that she kept a revolver in the drawer of her desk. Suddenly alive, he ran into the next room, rushed to her and twisted her arm cruelly ; she cried with pain and dropped the revolver. He pushed her without kindness into a chair. He was so angry that he couldn't speak.

She began to cry : while he looked on, she cried until she

was ugly, her swollen face lined and blotchy. Her crying became a feeble hiccough. He felt an agony of grief, disappointment, love. Everything was spoiled, everything was beginning.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" he said with the greatest difficulty.

"I can't cry any more," she stammered. "I can't."

He put his arms round her, forcing his body against hers. Let her feel the weight of his disappointment and his crushing love. "I'm going to resign. You were right, you're always right. It's foolish to go on. I'll resign. We'll go away."

He felt her relax. Her face seemed to have fallen in, and he had the impression that her mind was as shrunken and empty.

"Is it out of pity?"

"No," he said, "only love."

He had no idea whether the tears scalding his eyelids were for himself or her. "I must go back," he said. He got up clumsily. She was lying in her chair, half dead. She mumbled something. He bent over her. "What did you say?"

"There would still be time to join with Labenne."

He said nothing. She will never change, he thought.

Just as he was at the door, he thought: Would she have killed herself? He would never be sure. . . . He knew now that she held him as much by her dishonesty. The truth was no longer important.

When he left the house, he was surprised to find that it was only late afternoon. He thought he had been in Marguerite's room for hours — long enough to be cured of one illness and catch another, this time dangerous. The sunlight was still dazzling; if the shadows of trees and telegraph poles were a finger or so longer, it was the only sign the outer world gave of having noticed that a time had ended and another begun. No doubt the world was right. There are no divisions in a life, it is always, in every moment, breaking down, the illusion or the truth always coming nearer the surface. The moment of discovery is hardly worth marking. Besides, the ugliness or the grandeur is only declared at the end, before God.

He drove back by the shorter road. It had nothing of his past that it had been keeping for him, and could not have answered any questions. All the same, it had kept something in reserve. There was a point where, from a slight rise, he looked down towards Seuilly — not as he could look down on it from the Prefecture, seeing only its flock of roofs herded by the river, but seeing it with its houses planted strongly in the ground, holding to it by their weight of patient obscure memories, with no triumphs except such small ones as could be held in a humble pair of hands, no superb joys, no griefs that would do worse than sharpen the lines of a face and press the shoulders a little nearer the ground. He was seeing it for the first time with its own eyes, part of it, one of its children, not an ambitious man using it to brush his path. He had no impulse to say "my Prefecture", "my streets". Nothing was his. From the Abbey spire to the washing-place where the women kneeling under the thick plane trees chattered as they wrung their linen with strong hands, Seuilly belonged firmly to its past and its future; he was its servant, to whom it promised a life of effort and rest at last in his own field. He comforted himself with this promise — until he remembered that he had thrown away his birth-right; he was going, leaving his dear field to Labenne and Thiviers.

He shrugged his shoulders. What else could I do? he thought.

It was at this moment he felt the full shock of Thiviers's words. . . . "You fool. I would have made you a Minister . . . Premier. . . ." His disillusion was complete. So, all the years when he believed he was impressing Thiviers with his audacity, the banker was learning to distrust him. Everything he had done since he came back to Seuilly as Prefect had undermined him. He had prepared his fall.

He was stunned. He could see only that he had been a fool. All his hidden doubts of himself mocked him. . . . And now, the thought that he was leaving was an immense solace. All he wanted was to hide from the people who had seen him fail. Never feel their eyes on him again. . . . It was his way of killing himself.

When he told Lucien he was going to resign, the young man turned pale instead of his usual crimson, and looked at him with horror. He shut and opened his large hands as though he were trying to start his circulation. It started

apparently with a jerk, all the blood rushing to his face and eyes. For a moment Bergeot was looking at a stubbornly angry peasant. Then it was only Lucien Sugny again, with his poor smile and his poor mug of a taciturn respectful young man.

Bergeot tried to surprise in him the reverent affection which had so often bored him. But Lucien's air of respect was immovable; it surrounded him like the turret of a tank; from it, he watched the Prefect deploying all his ironical charm, and his face only became duller and more morose. At last Bergeot was tired of trying to charm the young man into admiring him for running away. He sat down at his desk and let the sense of his failure roll him over and over at the end of his strength. He began to talk to himself, almost truthfully—that is, with a sincere discouragement diluting his self-pity.

"I worked very hard; my ideas were good. When all is said and done, I haven't been any more dishonest than I was forced, to make imbeciles believe in me. I've helped a great many people. And none of it has been any good. In the end, I'm no one. I've made a mess of my life." He gave Lucien an indifferent glance. "You don't know yet how life disappoints and cheats. Your youth is only stupidity."

Unable to put up with his secretary's air of respect any longer, he sent him off.

Chapter 73

RIENNE left the barracks about ten o'clock; he meant to walk out to Thouédun for half an hour. Outside the barracks he saw Lucien Sugny. The young man came up to him timidly; he had been waiting for three hours in the hope of seeing him. They walked towards the High Street.

Lucien was suffering. He made the gestures of an old man, of his father coming home slowly, at dark, from his field. Like his father, he would not after this evening recognise his youth if it met him in the road.

"I don't understand," he murmured, when he had

finished telling his story. "Why is he doing this? What has happened?" He hesitated. "I can't feel any confidence in myself. Compared with him, I'm nothing. And if he runs away——"

Rienne had listened to him in silence. He was mildly sorry for the young man. Real as it was, deeply as it cut into his life, Lucien's grief would heal quickly. A few weeks, perhaps only a few days of action, and it would begin to trouble him so little he would not notice the day when it was only a light scar — which never reminded him that it was there. For his own grief . . . he accepted it and placed it to one side, to be looked at as soon as he had time. It would make its own place in his mind, leaving him room to enjoy hunger, weariness, sleep, a June morning at Thouédun. It would enter into all of them as a shadow, and he would become used to it. He could not help a moment of anguish before he spoke to Lucien.

"Don't think about it very much. It's foolish to measure a life by one act — even an heroic act. You know, I've seen so many men become heroes in an excited moment — or because at that moment there was nothing else they could do. All the same — a lie of that sort is worth something. . . . Less, of course, than the everyday choices. *He* made so many good and honest choices — you know that. What you don't know yet is that an illness can turn a hero into a coward." He saw that Lucien was listening avidly, and smiled. "I don't know how to account for this illness. It's everywhere, like influenza after the last war. . . . We're not allowed to talk about honour. And yet as soon as you prefer anything to it — security, or power — you fall ill. And to be well you needn't be successful or lucky. I advise you to keep your heart to yourself. Don't bet with it on another person — who has always the right to let you down. I'm not saying, Don't love anyone. I don't want you to starve! I'm only warning you not to expect so much."

To console Lucien, he had said more than he cared to. He was now tired of the young man's company. Lucien noticed it, and with an awkward phrase took himself off.

The narrow street leading to the High Street had become a dormitory. People were trying to sleep, some in their cars or carts, others on the pavement. Between the houses it was almost dark. Rienne had to step over these bundles; they made him think of the casualties at a clearing station, young

men with grey faces and an M on their foreheads. Two men were talking in low voices . . . "I'm our village baker." . . . "Which is your village?" . . . "Oisemont near Abbeville." . . . "And who is baking bread for the village now?" . . . "If you'd tell me where all of them are. . . ." A child looked up at him from under a deep forehead. Her back against a house door, a woman feeding her baby smiled with satisfied love : another woman was lying between two sleeping children ; her face wooden, carved out of a block of fear, she stared blankly at the passers-by — seeing what ? Another child, a boy, fair-haired, with large eyes half-open in the face of a mediaeval angel, smiling and candid . . . another . . . and another . . . their heads floating on the darkness. Rienne felt a profound weariness. This war is too nearly murder, he thought.

In the High Street he came on a straggling half-dozen soldiers who had managed to dodge the military police at the bridge. They were drunk ; none of them had his rifle. He let them stumble past. Steadying himself after an impulse of anger, he tried to think calmly about the disaster they symbolised, how far it had gone, how quickly it could be repaired.

He turned back, to the Quai Gambetta, to look at the river. Looking up-stream, he watched the poplars darken and the mass of willows turn the colour of dead cinders ; the light was leaving with regret all the shapes it had amused itself by living in during the day. It withdrew from level after level of the river ; its place was taken by a sharp scent of seaweed, dry grass, and of water after the sun has been on it. The whole valley of the Loire was breathing as gently, as sensuously, as that woman with her infant.

For a moment he confused Émile's failure — failure of the good clever little Émile — with the failure of France. Both of them had refused to fight. What Thiviers said, what Labenne said, what any leader said, was only the word of millions of Émiles. The moment he had thought this, he felt France protesting in him against such a foolish lie. There was another France — a child a thousand years old, a seed which was a tree with its seeds — living, unborn, immortal.

He gave the sleeping Loire a polite friendly smile, and turned towards his village.

It was close on midnight when he reached it and the

vicarage, but he knew that neither Letourneau nor Mourey would go to bed before two or three. He knocked on the window. Letourneau opened to him, without surprise.

The moment he was inside the room, he told them that Émile was resigning. He thought he was explaining it by his illness ; in fact, with more than his usual coldness, he was saying that Émile was too anxious to be approved of — poor child, he had all the intellectual courage in the world and very little emotional courage ; he had never understood that public opinion, rewards, were not worth the trouble.

" . . . It is perhaps my fault. I was always encouraging him. I didn't think."

" He's a politician," Jean Mourey said delicately. " He has been playing a fine political game, and hoping that events would save him from having to oppose Monsieur de Thiviers and the others." He hesitated. " And then her influence."

He kept out of his voice the contempt he felt for a sterile love.

Rienne did not answer. He thought of Marguerite with pity : lately he had guessed at a profound uncertainty under her air of confidence. She could have been a good creature, he thought.

" Women have more need of stability," Abbé Letourneau said. " An unstable woman does so much harm." In his childhood, in a village in the melancholy Sologne, he had believed that succubi exist ; he still half believed it. This woman had fastened on Bergeot.

There was a silence, then Mourey said,

" What is happening ? "

Rienne said coldly, " I was wrong to be pleased when we attacked in May. I didn't realise our weakness. G.H.Q. was completely outmanœuvred. We had an excellent plan, with one flaw — any German N.C.O. could foresee it and make a counter-plan. We — without imagination, without aeroplanes, with only our poor Meuse and our poor generals. . . . When we've thrown the Boches out, we can divide the blame between treachery and incompetence. I don't believe in treachery, it's not French."

" You can say that because you only know one sort," Mourey cried. " There are others. We have at least ten million traitors, each with his single field, each prepared to quarrel with his neighbour over a centimetre of ditch, only agreeing with him to despise and dislike change. It's

charming. Every year it brought thousands of Anglo-Saxons to admire our towns where nothing has changed since Louis-Philippe, our peasants still holding a right of way from Edward the Third of England, the admirable clarity of our ideas, so clear that not one of them told us about the catastrophic change in the rest of the world or prepared us to deal with it. Our famous way of living — strictly bourgeois, sterile, dying. It was childless, and too stiff itself to defend the country. . . . War or no war, the crisis would have come — and we should have failed.” His voice became slower, much too slow. “And now — we shall have a peace harder than defeat, and a despair worse than defeat. . . . A death harder than death.”

“Despair,” Letourneau said, smiling, “is neither French nor Christian.”

“You priest,” Mourey said gently.

“As you like,” Letourneau said. “But I know that men, even Frenchmen, can be saved by loving them. Plan the most delightful life for them — except, of course, for the rebels! — and they’ll spite you by dying out.”

“The Third Republic is finished,” Rienne said. “None of us need worry about it. Leave that to its debtors — of all nations.”

“What comes next?”

“Too soon to think of it.”

“I can tell you what comes,” Mourey said with energy. “A plague of dictators — big and little. No nation, not even Germany, breeds them so richly as we do. Why? Because, for all we boast so much of our intellect, we act first and think afterwards. Luckily, when we begin thinking, we laugh — and that pricks the dictator. Until then . . . There are Frenchmen who never knew what fraternity meant until they began to feel kindly towards Hitler——”

The priest had been listening, leaning untidily in his chair, his big head dragging forward his body. He began to talk without arrogance but with a rough authority — you would have said an honest shabby professor, too honest to do well for himself.

“Jean is half right. We have too many memories which misled us about the future, too many single fields adding up to one jealousy, too many disinterested ideas forming a philosophy of egoism; too much logic, too many good habits, too much clarity. They held a young mask over our age —

young, fresh, and, alas, impervious. If defeat cracks it, a young France may astonish the world. I say may — because peoples have died." He lifted his head — it was an effort. "It is sad when a people like the French dies."

There has never been a people like France, Rienne thought.

Mourey said with anger, "France can't die."

He is thinking of his wife, Rienne thought.

"When a people loses its faith in God," the priest said, "and even in the abstractions its new teachers held up to it — I mean justice, liberty, and the rest: when you have taught them to take everything to pieces, every belief, what have you left them that makes a people of them? The hatred of barbarism and Germany. A day has come when even that has failed you."

Mourey walked to the bookcase — full of theological works he would never touch. He stood with his back to the room. "In a different sense from the Germans, we had begun making barbarians of our children. I wasn't allowed to teach them that the spirit is more necessary than the body."

"You wished it, my dear Jean. It was you dismissed God from your class."

"It was perhaps a mistake," Mourey said. He would not say more. This was already too much. "I believe in human beings," he said quickly.

The priest smiled.

Surely it's simpler? Rienne thought. When he is told to clearly enough, the same Frenchman who spends his life counting sous dies without expecting any interest on them, thinking only of handing them, with the house, to his son. . . . He dies. . . . He kills, which is harder. . . . Afterwards he is forgotten, of course — what does it matter?

"This is not the end of us," he said.

He looked at his watch. His half-hour — and the familiar sense of standing between the two poles, the two clarities, the two idealisms, of the French spirit — was up.

"The end?" Mourey cried. "How could it be? How, if we were put out, would the rest of the world see to read? . . . Suppose the Boches destroy Chartres — there's still Joinville, Villon, Fouquet, to speak for our Middle Age; even if they burn all our Loire's cathedrals and châteaux they can't burn Gregory of Tours, Rabelais of Chinon, Ronsard of la Poissonnière, Descartes of la Flèche. . . . *Non omnis*

moriar. . . . Even the Gestapo can't kill writers, painters, musicians, philosophers, who had the good taste to die before June this year. . . ."

"You've forgotten Vigny — at Loches," Rienne said with energy. "He's still France."

"You see? You both make your act of faith," Letourneau said, smiling.

He went with Rienne to the door, and watched him out of sight. Better than Mourey, he knew what Rienne had paid for the minute when he let them discuss his foster-brother. Rienne was walking slowly, almost as slowly as if he had to carry someone.

The sky was dark enough, half an hour after midnight, for the stars to seem close. From here, Rienne could not see his house, but he gave a thought to it and Agathe : she was certainly asleep, she kept her habit of getting up at four in summer and six in winter. All those great names, he thought, names of a town, a province, a poet, Racine, Ingres, Aquitaine, the Marne, are not France. France is some good little nothing each of us is protecting behind the names. For Mourey, it is his quiet Michèle. Letourneau's must be folded in a nothing belonging to that Gontran none of us has seen. And mine? . . . Not worth asking — the answer was always an evening in his garden at Thouédun, between the house and Agathe's herbs.

He turned his back on the village and walked towards Seully. The quietness was not peace. In this calm starlit France, the poor humble France of Agathe suffered. He did not, even now, deny his confidence of early May : he withdrew it into himself, into such safety as June had left to any Frenchman.

When, he thought, you have lost everything, when as a child you have slept in the street or a ditch, under the threat of bombs, do you, if the bombs miss you, die of despair? Don't you find, in the ditch or in the ashes of a house, a young confident France, willing to put off until tomorrow the prudence of old age, the serenity of old age? Willing to risk everything today, in the intention of being rich — also today — in freedom, herbs, and a modest little eternity?

Chapter 74

TOWARDS midnight Piriac began to dream. He was in Verdun, going up the dark flight of steps, underground, which led from the tunnels to his cellar. He was uneasy. He reached the top of the stairs. A soldier, wearing his muddy greatcoat, formed himself out of the grey darkness and stepped forward. He stood, making no effort to move out of the way or salute, and Piriac struck him. Seized by fear, he was forced to murder the fellow, beating and striking in senseless rage, at last dragging the now shapeless body down the stairs to the tunnel. He began to run; the man he had killed followed him closely, so closely that if he stopped the thing would fall against him. He ran in the darkness, trying now and then to open a door in the earthen walls and escape that way. He never had time, his victim was always too near and he felt the weight of a rotting body on his neck.

He woke, trembling. He remembered the dream, his horror was still in the room, he could taste it. Afraid to sleep again, he kept his eyes open.

His bed was so narrow that he had to lie straight in it. He could have lit the small night-lamp, but that would be to admit his fear. . . . He began thinking of death, a thought which never troubled him in the day-time : most of his friends had died or been killed, his parents had died when they were much younger than he was now, his wife, his only son. They were pulling and would drag him over to them. What chance had he against so many of them, all younger than he was ? And not one of them would help him when the moment came. He remembered some words : *Le dernier acte est sanglant, quelque belle que soit la comédie en tout le reste : on jette enfin de la terre sur la tête, et en voilà pour jamais.* . . . A believer wrote that, he thought, with anguish : a man like myself.

He got out of bed with great trouble and stumbled across the room. Feeling about on the wall with both hands, he found the little Saint' Joan and took it back with him to bed, pushing it under the pillow. With it there, he felt less solitary. A prayer he had long forgotten — taught him by

his nurse, a country woman from the Vendée — came freshly into his mind.

"Blessed St. Anthony, when I am lost, find me ; when you have found me, do not let me go, hold me tightly by my hand."

He turned on his side so that he could lie with a hand under the pillow, and fell asleep. It was four o'clock when he woke again. He felt light and cool. For a moment he thought he was a young man.

He pulled himself up, and sat, an old man in a brown nightshirt, on the edge of the bed. The legs that had to carry his heavy body were the only shrunken part of him. He rubbed them and said kindly, "You have the worst of it, my friends. Cheer up. The order of the day is still : Hold firm."

He was calm. A decision had been given to him while he slept, he had only to put his hand under the pillow to feel it, as smoothly solid as wood. . . . He was going to defend Seuilly. It was useless — he knew it. Quite useless : the Germans were a sea of steel, wave breaking behind wave, across France. But here in Seuilly were troops who had not fought, tanks, guns ; the airfield had not been bombed. For three or four days he could hold back part of the wave, and so long as it was held anywhere France was not conquered. It could breathe — it might even be saved. . . .

He decided to send Ligny with orders to the posts in front of Seuilly. When his orderly came, he had remembered that Ligny was ill — he would be ! He sent the man to fetch Colonel Rienne. He felt that he disliked Rienne less than usual this morning ; he even found a likeness in him to his friend the Bishop. At the same age, Paul had the same look, cold and a little taciturn. . . . Nowadays, Paul is gentler, no, harder. Why think of Paul ? . . . He waited impatiently for Rienne to come in, and when he came, greeted him with the first friendly smile Rienne had ever had from him.

Chapter 75

AT six o'clock Rienne was on his way to the posts. It was a clear morning, with a kernel of heat. Before he reached the bridge he was forced to abandon his car. The traffic, even at this hour, was worse, a long wedge forced between the houses, the only movement that arm thrust up from the mass, or this woman squeezing herself between the cars, begging to be taken in. She went uselessly from car to car, as humbly ashamed as a stray dog. Only the boy — he could not have been more than twelve — holding the wheel of a car filled with the women of his family, said politely, "I am very sorry, but you can see there is no room." Single refugees wormed through, among them policemen, avoiding the eyes of the Seuil police; an infantry officer and his girl on horseback — the same horse; lost children — one of them was wounded. . . . Rienne made his way across the bridge to the island. Here the wedge was formed of military lorries and guns hauled by caterpillar tractors. A driver shouted, "Suppose we push straight over these animals in their cars. . . ." A company of Senegalese, exhausted, even they, were leaning in the doorways of houses. One of them laughed. "We ought to cut their throats. . . ." The wounded soldier lying behind them, against the wall, said, "You can begin with me, I'm tired of this." Stooping over him, another said gently, "Nearly home now." An aeroplane came over, faces were turned up. . . . "A Morane. It's the first of ours I've seen, the war must be over. . . ." Suddenly a jerk. The wedge broke into pieces, and each moved forward as though a string a long way in front were being tugged lazily. Suddenly another block. . . . The heat and the smell of petrol pinned down everything except a mongrel flattening himself under its edge. Suddenly a jerk. . . .

Rienne caught sight of an officer he knew. Lieutenant Flamond was on foot, walking behind a group of soldiers not of his unit. He was covered with dust, even over his eyes and mouth. Rienne shouted, and Flamond forced his way to the edge. He had been fighting on the Seine: he was three days without orders; on the third, he withdrew his

men. They retreated in order until the evening when they found themselves struggling in a bog of civilians and civilian cars. He had lost his men in it. His words, he scarcely opened his mouth, had to squeeze as hard as refugees to get past.

"You withdrew without orders?"

"Why not? The Boches knew all about our movements; there must have been a traitor in every battalion headquarters——"

"Nonsense. Don't repeat such rubbish."

A spurt of rage parted Flamond's lips a little. "What the devil would you have done if you were a junior officer holding a sector, and you knew that the officers on both sides of you were going to pull out without orders the moment things got hot? You would beat it too."

"No," Rienne said drily. "You should have fought. If the others were cowards, what difference does it make?"

"And the men? I ought to have got them killed uselessly?"

"How could you know what was useless? Did you know what was going on on the other fronts?"

Flamond began stammering. "You don't know what you're talking about. This war, the officers, the ordnance, the politicians, everything is ——"

He pushed his way back into the crowd.

Rienne crossed the second bridge with less trouble. The short distance to Ollivier's headquarters took him another half-hour. . . . Ollivier had been up for three nights. He was drinking black coffee — not, he said, to keep him awake; to calm him. For the first time in his life he was in despair. It made him laugh.

"It only needed these," he said, pointing. "We can't even retreat like any other army. We must drag all our possessions with us, down to the most detestable of our great-aunts. And the canary. First we throw away the bridge-heads of the Somme, then the southern bank of the Seine at all the points where it's high enough to be defended by old women — and cling like heroes to our mattresses, clocks, wheelbarrows, Hispano-Suizas, sewing-machines, and so on and so on. I can do nothing, I tell you, nothing — unless you get these children and cowards off the roads. You'll see I've taken the barricades away to let them through. What is Weygand up to? Foch — when we were retreating from the

Aisne, don't you remember, kept the refugees off the roads until late afternoon. You're going to tell me that Weygand isn't Foch! I know it. And 1940 isn't 1914, and France isn't France."

"There you're wrong," Rienne said, smiling.

"Yes, I'm wrong. But how the devil am I to use this road?"

"I'll see to it," Rienne said. "Anything else?"

"Yes. While you're about it, please blow up the bridge into Seuilly, and cut me off from Piriac. I want to be left in peace with my tanks and my Boches."

Rienne laughed at him. "Dear Michel."

"You ought to stay with me."

"Do you want to ask me anything about your orders?" Rienne said with a sigh.

"Certainly. Why weren't they given me in May? . . ."

On his way back, Rienne told the subaltern in charge at the bridge that the refugees would be turned off the main road before they reached Seuilly. The young officer was horrified. "But it's reported that the Boches are pushing down on both sides of Seuilly. These wretched people will run slap into them——"

Rienne interrupted him. "They ought not to be here," he said coldly. "It would have been better to stop them, even if it meant shooting a few. They're doing a great deal to lose the war."

He went off. This child thinks I'm a brute, he said to himself.

At the barracks he gave his orders. Then he rang up the Mayor. The line was out of order. He decided to see Labenne. The traffic had been melted by the sun and was moving slowly. Suddenly a woman carrying a child stepped in front of his car. She was just not run down. Rienne spoke to her. She showed him the child's grey wrinkled face, and said, "He's dying." Her left arm was bandaged; blood had soaked through on to the child's coat. The day before, a German airman had turned his machine-gun on the column.

"Fancy," she said seriously, "I saw his head. He was dark."

Rienne reflected that hers was the only blood he had seen in this war. The hospital was on his way and he helped her into his car. Catching sight of Abbé Garnier on the pave-

ment, he beckoned him. "Come with us," he said; he felt sorry it had to be this priest.

Before they reached the hospital, he had been forced silently to ask Garnier's pardon. Garnier had taken the child and was talking to the woman as if he lived next door to her in the village. His gestures, even his voice, belonged to a village, even when he was saying, "You must let God have this child and not grudge it to Him. They're used to children up there, it's not as if he was going to strangers." The woman was sitting next to Rienne: he felt her relax.

The courtyard of the hospital was like a fair-ground; the military ambulances drew in among a sweating crowd of nurses, doctors, orderlies, stretcher-bearers. No music: long agonised screams from a wounded man in one of the ambulances. It was useless to ask one of these exhausted doctors to look at a dying baby. Rienne left the two of them with Garnier — with the goodness of Garnier.

Before he reached the Town Hall he saw that Seuilly had given itself up to a nightmare. The shops were closed and in every side street cars and vans were being loaded, with a frenzied inconsequence. He recognised a face. It was Jolivet, the mathematics master. With his wife, he was pushing the last useless bundle into an overladen little car. Rienne spoke to him.

"Why are you going?"

Jolivet's face was empty of everything, except fear. "The Germans will be here in an hour. They've crossed the Loire at Nevers."

"I assure you that's not true."

Jolivet took no more notice. He was dazed. Almost insane with fear, he believed nothing now unless it was a lie. His wife was carrying his frock-coat; he snatched it from her and tore the ribbon of the Croix de Guerre from the buttonhole. Then he got into the car with her and drove off.

There goes a real deserter, Rienne thought. In the same moment, he felt certain that Jolivet would come back. It was a question of stretching the line a little thinly, until the gaps could be filled. . . . Suddenly he realised that something more biting than fear, even than treachery, was destroying the minds of the Jolivets. They had begun to think that France was finished. It was the emptiness frightened them. . . . A woman ran past him carrying a copy of the *New*

Order. He took it from her. It was a single sheet and a single article, advising the people of Seuilly to "evacuate the town without a moment's delay. . . ."

He took it with him to Labenne, who looked at it with indifference. "What am I to do?" he asked, "the harm has been done now."

"You can contradict it," Rienne said. "You can go out yourself into the streets and talk to people. I came here to ask you to do that. . . . I realise that you consider the war well lost. But I suppose you would rather Seuilly were not ruined?"

"I am helpless."

"All the same, you will be held responsible," Rienne said.

Labenne smiled. "Who to?"

Rienne left him. With all his distrust of Labenne, he had never understood until now that he thought of Seuilly as an unimportant stage on his road; he would push it without pity to add its drop of fear to the torrent raging in France. For the first time he saw that Labenne was not venal. He was venality itself, the anatomy of venality.

Eleven o'clock. He was hungry; he had not eaten since noon yesterday. He decided to ask Marie to make him an omelette.

Before he reached the café, he saw that there was a crowd outside it, pressed between a line of police and the wall of the embankment. He forced his way through. A policeman told him he would find the Inspector at the back of the café.

Opening the back door, he found himself in the little kitchen. The Inspector turned round quickly, his face changing when he saw that an officer had come in.

"You can help us," he said.

"What is it?" Rienne asked.

He looked at Pierre. The young man was stretched out on the floor, bandaged round his body; a stain of blood was spreading across it: he had closed his eyes.

"He won't speak," the Inspector said. "Hasn't opened his mouth. . . . He came home yesterday afternoon — there was a customer in the café, and he turned him out and locked the door. He didn't put the shutters up. This morning two workmen who get their breakfast here came, couldn't get in, looked in the window of the other room and

saw his wife lying across their bed on her face. They could see she had been wounded. But she was dead. He must have shot her some time the night before. . . . But he's never spoken. See what you can do."

"Leave me alone with him," Rienne said.

The Inspector went through into the café.

Rienne waited a minute. Where was Marie? he wondered. Of course — they would have left her lying alone in the room where, he felt sure, she had as often lain awake as slept, lying awake with her fear and her husband's absence. And Pierre who, certainly, thought little of anyone except his wife. What had happened? He sat down on the only chair and looked at him. His face was the colour of the dried earth on his uniform. He had been sleeping in ditches.

"Pierre," Rienne said sharply.

Pierre opened his eyes. He looked at the officer without recognition, but with a slight uneasiness. He knew that when an officer spoke to him he ought at least to pay attention.

"Listen to me carefully, Pierre. We are fighting the Germans. You ought to be with your regiment. What are you doing here?"

A harassed look came into Pierre's eyes. He frowned and said — obviously it hurt him to speak, "We were beaten. The officer left."

"And then?"

"I came home."

"And then?"

Pierre had shut his eyes again. "Must I say?" he said under his breath.

"Certainly."

With difficulty, Pierre said, "I had a letter. I asked her. She said, No, no — only No. She cried."

"Where is the letter?" Rienne asked gently.

"My pocket."

The letter was as stained as the bandage. It was written in indelible pencil, but the stain proved that there is no such thing as an indelible lead. Rienne took it to the window. He had the greatest trouble in making it out: it was to the effect — with credible detail — that Marie was sleeping with a certain Artaud; and it was signed, Your friend D. Seized by a foolish rage, he went back to Pierre.

"This isn't true," he said.

Pierre did not speak. He turned his head to one side on the tiled floor, pressing his lips together.

The Inspector opened the door again and looked in: Rienne waved him away, then followed him into the café and showed him the letter. A police sergeant who was there read it with him; the two of them looked at it and at each other, and the Inspector nodded. He had, he told Rienne, seen one of these letters before. The young woman had probably had a letter inviting her to write to the deputy and ask him to press the Government to make peace—

"She had," Rienne interrupted. "She showed it to me, I told her to tear it up."

The Inspector did not say: Then you sentenced her to be shot. But he coughed two or three times behind his hand before saying,

"If she'd done what they asked her to, her husband wouldn't have had this letter."

Rienne steadied himself with an effort. In the same moment he felt that he had done something terrible, and that he was not responsible. He could only think of himself as a murderer if he thought of Pierre as one. He must put the whole thing out of his mind until later. But later he would perhaps have forgotten the worst of it. . . . He must risk that.

"Who are *they*?" he asked.

"Our young fascists," said the Inspector.

"No, it's a communist trick," his sergeant said firmly.

"One or the other," the Inspector said.

"What are you going to do with that poor devil?"

"The hospital. He's almost sure to die. He did his best! The doctor says he has a bullet in his heart. When we move him it will probably finish him."

Rienne went back into the kitchen. He stooped over Pierre and said,

"Pierre, my poor child, I must go. You'll be all right."

Pierre looked at him without speaking. . . .

It was now close on midday. Thinking he had better eat something — it might be a long time before he had another chance — he walked along the embankment, and went into Buran's. The room was crowded. He was looking at it when the loud-speaker began to say in a harsh sputtering voice that Marshal Pétain had taken over the Government. . . . A lady opening a mussel between her fingers

burst into tears of joy. . . . Pétain's voice, cold, tired, trembling, the mendicant voice of Polonius.

" . . . my heart goes out to the poor refugees in their misery. . . . I give myself to France. . . . It is with a heavy heart that I say we must stop fighting. . . . I have applied to our opponent to ask him if he is ready to sign with us, as between soldiers after the fight and in honour, a means to put an end to hostilities. . . ."

Rienne turned and went out into the street. It was badly put, he said to himself coldly ; an army doesn't stop fighting before the armistice is signed.

He did not at first separate the noise of an aeroplane from the noise, like an avalanche, inside his own ears. An ambulance which had just left the bridge swerved on to the pavement as the first bomb fell. Terror pressed men and women out of cars to roll in the gutter or beat on the locked doors of shops ; two wounded men climbed out of the ambulance and turned to help a third ; with anger, Rienne saw driver and orderly leave them and run for shelter.

The aeroplane had gone : looking about, he could not see where the bombs had fallen. He heard more bombing going on a few miles away ; after a moment he thought it was at Thouédun. When he was halfway there he saw that the village was on fire ; clouds of smoke stood up like shadows painted on the white sky. His driver stopped at the foot of the hill. Refugees who were in the town when the bombing started were pouring back out of it and running into each other on the hill like an amusement park where the passengers collide in toy cars and scream with laughter. And in fact some of them were screaming.

The chauffeur pulled his car into the mill-garden out of the way, and Rienne began running up the hill. One side of the street nearest the wall was burning ; under a ceiling of smoke the houses sprouted steel spirals of yellow and red flame ; softer flames hung from windows, others flew up from the eaves like martins. The heat was just bearable.

He saw Letourneau at the end of the street ; he was helping to carry dead and wounded out of the litter of glass into a field. Most were children, or women who had come back from the field to get his meal for a child. Some were strangers — refugees. A man lying on his face had closed his fingers over a wooden stake driven through his hand : he was dead. The little boy beside him was alive, with his

poor face of fear : he was a pity with his fear : his eyes shuddered. Letourneau turned the dead peasant on to his back.

"He's one of ours."

Rienne picked up the child. "And this one?"

"A stranger," the priest said. "If you have time, take him to the vicarage for me. It wasn't touched."

But Rienne took him to Agathe. He had to see that she was safe. He asked her if she had been afraid. "No," she said, soothing the child, "I was praying for you, I thought it must be worse in Seuilly. You're really not hurt?"

He smiled. After all, I have a family, he thought.

Why try to destroy this village? It was the oldest part of the village which was burning — almost five centuries of work and patience were feeding the flames. When he reached the end of the street, a cart was moving away with its load. A woman running past looked at it and cried out, then fainted. The driver stopped. Ashamed, he went into the nearest house and came out carrying a blanket, which he spread over the heap. "I should have thought of it," he said to Rienne.

At the foot of the hill, Rienne saw Jean Viard coming out of his garden; it backed on to the road here. Viard stopped, and shouted, "They've killed our son."

"Your grandson?"

"Of course. Who else should I be crying about?" His eyes were dry. "He was in the upper field. I ran up there when I heard them. Too late. He was as full of holes as a colander. . . . The war can go on for fifty years, I have nothing to lose. . . . But to kill a child . . . it's not war."

"No," Rienne said wearily, "it's not war."

He found nothing else to say to the man. Viard looked at him for a moment and spoke in a lower voice.

"If I thought this war had done anyone any good; but you'll see. . . ."

He turned and went slowly up the hill to the village. Rienne got into his car. A car coming from Seuilly rushed towards them and drew up just in time to avoid the wreckage of a cart blocking the road. Labenne got out and started to run up the hill, gasping. He saw Rienne. "My children," he said. "In the château."

"I'm told it wasn't hit," Rienne said.

He saw relief and the shadow of arrogance move across

Labenne's face, wiping out the agony. It was not in the least pitiful. He remembered seeing something like it before, in November 1918, when a deserter who had been sentenced to death was reprieved because he was able to prove that he had been at his post until an hour after the armistice. You could think that Labenne was feeling the same pride in having escaped, by a few minutes, a penalty he had earned.

Chapter 76

RIENNE reported to General Piriac : he had placed a guard, a corporal and two men, with machine-guns, at a point on the main road four miles north of Ollivier's headquarters. Here a rather poor road turned off west and followed the north bank of the Loire to Geulin. The refugees were being directed on to this road. At Geulin they could cross the bridge, where another guard would direct them to keep south-west to the coast. . . .

“ And this evening ? ” Piriac said.

“ The bridge at Geulin will be destroyed at eight this evening——”

Piriac interrupted. “ But the refugees ? ”

“ I shall have an officer there, telling them to find shelter in the villages——”

Piriac looked at him. “ There's no difference between that and murder,” he said almost inaudibly. “ We are murdering these people.”

Rienne saw that he had lost his resolution of early morning. This morning he had talked in a firm voice of a delaying action ; his orders had been clear and sensible ; he seemed younger, he was smiling, as though the decision to fight had given him in his lifetime some of the qualities of his legend — humanity, for example. Rienne felt despair and anger.

“ They will be safer in the villages than they are on the roads,” he said quietly.

“ I ought to spare them,” Piriac murmured. “ And now that the Marshal has practically ordered me not to fight. . . .

He must have meant me to interpret it that way. . . ." A look of fretful anger came into his face. "Where is Woerth? He should be bringing me orders, not seeing what he can pick up for himself. I'll say one thing for you, Rienne. You are an honest man."

Rienne was baffled. Piriac had not cancelled his orders, but clearly he had lost all heart for an action. Perhaps he was losing his memory as well. That would not be a bad thing! . . . The old general was fidgeting in a drawer of his table. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Three o'clock, sir."

"He isn't coming," Piriac cried suddenly.

"Who, sir? General Woerth isn't expected before this evening."

"General Woerth can drown himself. Isn't this Monday?"

Rienne remembered that Piriac always played chess on Monday afternoon, with his friend the Bishop. So, in this selfish insensible old man, there was still something which felt and suffered. . . . At this moment the Bishop came in. Piriac's joy was almost violent.

"I thought you'd gone!"

The Bishop smiled at him tenderly. "Why should I go, and where?"

Piriac made a confused gesture.

"I'm a little late only because I've been talking to some of our people, persuading them to stay at home, or at least not to go far. I don't know why no one has told them on the wireless to stay in their houses. It seems to me that political shepherds are not really better than our poor parish priests."

Piriac was not listening. "Why have you come?" he said softly: he was leaning forward at a dangerous angle. A single tear rolled down his left cheek.

"Isn't it our day for chess——?"

"But you know the Germans are almost here. They'll be here the day after tomorrow, even tomorrow" — he smiled, slyly and anxiously — "we are going to stop them. . . . Are you pleased with me?"

The old Bishop did not seem in the least surprised. "Ah, I'm very glad. Have you time for one game? If we begin at once?"

Piriac looked at Rienne. "You can go," he said in a clear voice. "Be here at six. . . ."

For the first time in his life, Rienne neglected a duty — to go out to Geulin and see that his orders were being carried out. He went to see Bergeot. He half believed still that, at the last minute, Émile would discover himself, he would run his head into the angle of a trench, or only into the angle of an old wall where were hidden pages torn out of one of the poets they were not allowed to read in the third, and the shock would remind him of himself; the shrewd politician would find that he was a Frenchman, only a Frenchman. If that happens, Rienne thought, everything else, and the future, will be all right.

When he reached the Prefecture the old porter pretended not to see him, then to have a mouth too full of the nails he was knocking into a case to be able to speak. He waved Rienne upstairs. . . . Bergeot was not in his room. Lucien Sugny came in and said that he had not been in the Prefecture all day. He was at the Manor House. . . . Just as Rienne was leaving, he came.

He walked in with a jauntiness that only aggravated his air of collapse. A coarse thumb had pressed out hollows under his chin and at the side of his nostrils, the two places where age finds the clay easiest to work. His illness, as Rienne persisted in calling it, had reached its acute stage. He turned Lucien out of the room. As soon as they were alone, "You know I've resigned?" he said. "As quickly as possible, tomorrow or the next day, I'm going to take Marguerite to Hendaye. From there I hope we can get into Portugal."

Rienne was surprised to find he could feel what, after seeing Viard, he hesitated to call anguish. "Don't you know that Seuilly is going to be defended? Piriac——"

"I don't believe it," Bergeot interrupted.

"It's true."

After a moment, Bergeot said, "Well, it has nothing to do with me."

Rienne did not answer. He knew what to do. He had come without any plan, expecting the sight of Émile to give him one. It had. And — what he had not expected — it was intolerably cruel. Nor had he expected to have to pay for it with one of his few irreplaceable possessions. At forty-eight, you can't begin a second friendship which will absorb the memories of a lifetime. Until this moment he had never doubted that he had foreseen and accepted all the

sacrifices he would have to make in the life he had chosen — or had it chosen him? An illusion — he had not foreseen this. To see it more clearly, he shut his eyes.

He opened them, and saw Émile looking at him anxiously, with a sort of timidity.

"Very well, it has nothing to do with you," he said. "It has only to do with me and all the other men you are putting between you and the enemy. When you are in Portugal or America — I suppose it will be America. Since you have money there——"

Émile lost his head. "Who told you?"

"... you will be able to live without us. I don't grudge you your life — you know that. How could I? We carry with us exactly the same weight of school books, the same number of lines of Corneille, the same voices of a village and poverty, the same memories — to an ounce. Until now you have never cheated."

"Don't punish me, Bonamy."

He has the right to say that, Rienne thought; I've taken so much trouble to seem hard and immovable that in the end I feel nothing — except this . . . hate of myself.

"Will you do one thing for me before you go?" he said.

"Anything," Émile said.

"Then will you give me truthful answers to two or three questions — as truthful as if one of us was going to be shot?"

He saw the sweat forming on Émile's forehead. He took care not to pity him, because it would have been pitying himself. And in fact, Émile was losing less than he was.

Émile nodded.

"First question. How long have you known that Thiviers was willing to collaborate — let's call it that — with the Germans?"

"Since some time in May. I forget the date. The Germans were at Amiens."

These questions weigh too much, he thought wearily, laying the second down in front of Émile. "And, about the same time, you suspected and then knew that Labenne was actively a traitor; you didn't denounce him because he was involved with Thiviers, and to move against them would bring down on you all the props of your career? My poor Émile. Poor little comedian."

Émile's anger made him speechless. He leaned across his desk, trying to control himself. Suddenly he paled and sat

down. Rienne knew him so well that he could follow moment by moment the confusion in his mind between rage and honesty, he knew when Émile reached the point of saying to himself : I am a failure, and the next step when he said : I am a coward.

Émile looked at him almost with relief.

" You're making up for more than forty years of looking after me," he said in a dry voice.

Rienne realised that, until this moment, he had hoped he was going to be let off dishonestly, without paying. " What are you going to do ? " he said.

" Stay."

" As Prefect ? "

" As Prefect if my resignation is not accepted. In any case, I can stay here until they send my successor. After that, as a mere citizen."

" Everyone respects you," Rienne said. " As citizen or Prefect, you'll have an influence."

" Everyone ? " Bergeot smiled. " You for instance ? Besides, I'm only staying for my own sake."

He could not be certain he had cured Émile's illness. But, obviously, he had cured him of an old friendship. He felt himself to be hateful. His hands were trembling, he rubbed them a little. It was like the first few moments after an attack, when he had often felt, deeper than his pleasure in being alive, a certain contempt for himself and his life.

Bergeot rang. When Lucien came, he said coldly,

" You'll stay here to answer all my telephone calls. When Madame de Freppel rings up you'll tell her I've decided to stay here — and that I advise her, no, beg her, to leave Seully tonight, or at the latest tomorrow morning. Tell her to expect a letter from me at Hendaye, at the Eskualduna. If she comes here, I don't want to see her." He turned a distorted face to Rienne. " You see what saving myself means ? Sacrificing the only person who depends on me. . . . You'll move into this room," he said to Lucien, " and I'll work in yours for the time being. Do you understand me ? Am I putting too much on you ? "

" No," Lucien said.

" Good."

Rienne had reached the door. He turned to look at his friend. Bergeot was staring at his desk, sunk. He did not lift his head.

Chapter 77

TOWARDS half-past three, Labenne received two visitors — General Woerth and M. de Thiviers. He had scarcely had time, since he came back from Thouédun, to change his shirt, from which he could have wrung fear, and tell Mme Labenne that *his* children were safe. Her laments bored him and he said nothing to her of the anguish he had gone through. Looking at her, he thought: You couldn't have given me other children: what use are you?

The peculiar genius of these days had the features of these three men. Each of them, today, was a little larger than life, and had an air of candour underlying his normal expression, his air of coldness in Woerth, his patient smile in Thiviers; in Labenne his joining of grossness to a brutal geniality. The light was so strong that it dissolved everything except the soul, with its deformations and the abscess which was its point of anxiety, hate, truth. As if aware that he was exposed, Woerth was trying deliberately to control his tics: he kept his hands under the table so that he should not grip the edge in his delicate fingers; he sat leaning forward to make it easier to keep his eyes down instead of looking at Labenne and being irritated by it into raising an eyebrow.

He was just back from Bordeaux; he had come straight here from the airfield, without seeing Piriac.

The telephone rang. Labenne listened; covered the mouthpiece and said, with a slight smile,

"It's Huet. He saw you both coming in, he feels sure we shan't mind his joining us; he has private information — and so on——"

"On no account," Woerth said, with passion. "I detest the fellow."

"He's still talking," Labenne murmured. He amused himself by speaking to Huet in an affectionate voice. . . .

"Any other time, my dear deputy . . . oh, no, no, not politics, a question of a will, yes, a legacy . . . a quite private affair." He let Huet go on talking so that he could listen easily to Woerth. Without changing his rigid pose, the general was explaining to Thiviers in a low voice that the rout of fifty-one divisions was complete, the soldiers were

throwing away their arms, even mutinies were not inconceivable. It was anarchy, the natural end of a Republic. The banker had an air of resigned solemnity. You croak together like washerwomen, Labenne thought, grimacing: ah, you wait; I have the two of you in my fingers, one rainy day I'll drop you in the gutter and drown you. Who would notice . . .? Thiviers was recalling the Soviets formed by Russian soldiers. Could one be sure that in Seuilly . . .? Idiot! Labenne said. If there were French Soviets, I should only have to look in a glass to see Lenin. But for the moment — reassure yourselves — I only speak French: give me two years, while the rest of Europe is learning to speak German, and I'll invent a faithful little language of my own; all these charming words you're using at this moment, and trembling — authority, ruin, massacres — will have the meaning I choose to give them, no other, the same for bankers, poets, generals. . . .

"You're forgetting that there are well-officered divisions, which have not fought and are not disorganised," Woerth said coldly. "They will deal with mutinies and disorders, including civil ones. . . . Your works are safe."

Labenne put the receiver down, gently, to give Huet the pleasure of talking to himself for a few minutes. "I'm informed that Piriac is going to defend the town."

Woerth's eyebrow gave him away. "You are informed——?"

"There are no military secrets now," Labenne said. "Political ones, perhaps — but I'm beginning to think I understand even those."

"The fact that Marshal Pétain has asked for terms implies surrender on any terms. Therefore it would be useless to defend Seuilly. General Piriac will see this for himself."

"You could all the same point it out to him," Labenne said, grinning. "His eyesight is none too good." He knew that he was repulsive to Woerth; it gave him a delicious pleasure. "And naturally he's sensitive about his honour. You could explain to him, perhaps, that the soaking of our fields in blood — even those which are used to the trick — the crushing of towns which escaped last time, and all the delights of invasion, the dead children — true, it's one way of ending war for ever — communism and more killing, really cancel out his honour as a professional murderer. No

offence to you, my dear general. But you soldiers are very like saints, and saints, like all exiles, are shockingly bad citizens. They don't believe in the happiness of common men. . . . I hope at least that the Marshal has his head out of the clouds. A saint will be a poor hand at armistice terms. Offer him a cross to climb on, and he'll hand over France complete to the smallest village ! ”

Thiviers interrupted with his gentle tact — to give Woerth time to ignore this provocation.

“ Who is the Marshal's financial adviser ? Monsieur Baudouin, of course. Excellent. I know him, and I can assure you he'll consent to nothing I wouldn't consent to myself.”

“ And of course you wouldn't consent to anything that would damage you,” Labenne said, with his charming smile. “ You're too generous — and it would be ungenerous to harm so good and charitable a man. . . . I think you'll find the armistice very precise about aircraft works.”

“ Really ? ” Thiviers looked at him closely. “ I hope — I'm convinced the terms will be honourable. After seventy years of injustice between France and Germany it will be pleasant to see a little justice.”

“ Justice, injustice,” Labenne said with contempt. “ I admire these mediaeval symbols as much as I admire history. History is written to assure the successful that they succeeded. History will say — of me, for instance — that I was wise and far-sighted ; it won't say anything I could tell it about my bad habits. . . . And justice — Monsieur de Thiviers, I would sooner be the man who decides what is just than the people he is deciding for. . . . ”

Thiviers was silent. He had wakened this morning with a confidence in himself which nothing, not even Labenne's grossness, could shake. Never had his courtyard, with the fountain, seemed so tranquil, so sunk in the past of the province, and the pigeon tumbling from the shade into the sunlight so clear a promise of the future. Never had he felt so sure, not only of himself, but of everything he touched ; his table — for the first time, he could not doubt that it had been Diderot's — the paperweight from Ferney, the ink drying on his latest authentic sentence. A delicious freshness brought the farthest poplar so close to him that he believed he had been given back his young eyesight, even, when the sun on his head made him smile with joy,

his young senses. . . . He attributed his joy, his tenderness when he thought of the future, the calm which had obliterated all memory of his despair and all desire, except this childish desire he felt to take fountain and pigeon in his arms and peel strips of moss from the old stones, to the armistice he expected. This morning the tension of centuries had given way. The aching nerve in France, which was Germany, had ceased to ache — from today, from the moment of surrender. Never again would the frontier with Germany open in France's side, and blood and gold pour out. Finished, it was finished. The sun — he stretched his arms in it — had risen for the last time on an old agonised woman; this evening it would set behind the child who would turn to smile at it. . . . He attributed these figures of speech, unfolding in him one after another like the moss-rose he saw opening below his window, to the new flowering of his genius. A new France, he thought, smiling — and I promise to live for it.

"We shall have a strong Government — the first for three hundred years," he said. "It means the end of fear."

"How well you put it!" Labenne said. "But will people be happier? They'll be quieter . . . it's something!"

After they had settled between them the several measures to be taken to keep Seuilly quiet under the Germans, Thiviers said,

"The Germans in Paris are behaving very decently. Obviously they mean to let us down lightly. Very wise of them. It may be Italian influence — our impetuous Latin sister — but I prefer to believe it's due to what I call my Germany. That delicious country — mediaeval if you like, but still young — of gables, Town Hall clocks which bring out our Lord and eleven of the disciples at midday, keeping Judas back to appear alone at midnight, and sentimental friendships. I should find it very difficult to live without this irrational Germany to balance my logic. . . . I feel certain — I said as much to Marshal Pétain when I had the honour of talking to him a week ago — we shall have peace."

Certainly you'll have peace, Labenne thought coldly, and it will be brutal and pitiless. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred will become German serfs — there's your Middle

Ages for you ! So much the worse for them. . . . Labenne intended to be an ally, a governor of the French province of the German Empire. He was convinced that France, like his wife, was past the age of child-bearing. The future had the hands of the prolific Germans. Why not, since it was springing from German bodies ? Very well, he would be a German. But a German with a French stomach, who lived in France. Exchange a Loire salmon, peaches from his wall at Thouédun, wine from his vineyard, for anything watered by the Rhine ? What a bargain ! He felt the deepest contempt for Thiviers's sentimentalising about Germany. And his ignorance . . .

"I have a protest to make," Thiviers said, smiling. "I saw the fellow you sent me yesterday — Edgar Vayrac. I don't care for him. I thought him very unpleasant."

"He is," Labenne said. "Extremely unpleasant. Precisely why I'm keeping him. You don't realise — words stupefy you — that the changes in France will be a revolution. When a new society takes over, what is it except a revolution ? Of men, laws, ideas. . . . The minor agents of the revolution are not men, their characters and sentiments are irrelevant. If such men weren't what they are, if they weren't Vayracs, they would be useless to the authorities who have to use them——"

"But why use them ?" Thiviers said.

"They're invaluable to the authorities in applying their new justice. A society in the making can't afford weakness. Afterwards, when they're no longer useful, they can be dropped." He added reflectively, "I can't imagine any sort of police which had no use for a Vayrac."

"I hope our society——"

Labenne rolled his eyes. "You should be hoping that the Germans will purge it."

Since the serious discussions ended, Woerth had not been listening. His skin was yellower than usual, and he was worn and haggard. This was not due entirely to the pilot of his aeroplane. Like Thiviers, like Labenne, he felt today at the height of his genius — and indeed was. Unlike them, in that he was not happy. Far from soothing, his certainties tortured him. He believed that, for now, Germany was unconquerable, that Europe — in which out of spite, only to delete her, he included England — could only submit : there is no arguing with a miracle of metal, imagination, will. He

blamed the Republic bitterly for France's weakness, and the rest of the world with contempt because it had not, in 1919, formed itself into a shell to protect France while she struggled out of her dead skin. The operation would take place now, under German eyes, in the full anguish of a German victory.

Not that he was in any pain for the future of France. It would equal exactly its past of egoism and greatness. . . . In France a great man has no need to become, like Goethe, a European : the more boldly he interprets the universe to itself, the more firmly and casually he remains French. . . . Not for a moment did Woerth doubt that France would reconquer Europe — in her turn. It was his own future he doubted. Flying across France from Bordeaux, he looked with a personal anguish at villages which from this height were only the buttress of a church, and the tapestry of vines. . . . Can I live long enough to see the Renaissance? . . . He felt only a modest comfort in the thought that his bust would face that of Foch in the new Panthéon. Shivering with fever, ambition, and hate, deep and religious, of the conqueror, he stepped out on the airfield feeling, for the first time in his sixty-four years, an old man.

He distrusted Labenne. He knew that Labenne intended to lord it over the Department. Was that the end of his ambition? Each time he saw the Mayor he was forced, rigid with distaste, to recognise that he was looking at an intelligent and brutally fearless man.

"In the end," he said drily, "we all have the same interests. They are the interests of France."

"An unusual coincidence," Labenne smiled.

The telephone rang. He listened. "For you," he said to Thiviers, "a Dr. Charles-Gouraud. Excited or very angry."

He watched Thiviers frowning nervously at the instrument. . . . "No, no," he was saying, quietly, kindly, "I assure you . . . at least a fortnight, probably much longer. . . . We have plenty of time. . . ." Labenne would have known he was lying, even if he had not seen the frown contradicting the soothing voice.

Thiviers put the receiver back, smoothed his forehead, and sat down. He is repairing his make-up, Labenne thought. "Will the Government stay in Bordeaux?" he asked.

"I think not," Woerth said. "Never believe anyone who tells you that claret is a safe wine — three of the Under-

Secretaries have twinges of gout already. . . . I'm interested. I've been offered a place in the new Government."

"You'll accept?" Thiviers hid his envy. He did not want office, but all power wielded by others seemed robbed from him.

The news did not surprise Labenne. This morning he had learned that since the middle of May, Woerth had been secretly in touch with Weygand. He congratulated Woerth, as one cunning fellow to another. "No, you won't stay in Bordeaux," he added slyly. "The terms include the handing over of all that coast — down to the Pyrénées." He saw that he had chilled them. . . . Just as well to let them know — I too have friends. . . .

"You listen to the German wireless?" Woerth said, mocking him.

Labenne hid his resentment. This was one of the moments when he detested the other two for no sharper reason than that they were of good family. For good or evil, he was a peasant. Loyalty and treachery were rolled together in his peasant's soul. Had he been a simple traitor, he would have had fewer victims in his eye, lived less easily, and been unworthy to appear alone . . . at midnight. . . . He was loyal to one thing, his land; and he was as certain as death that in alliance with Germany the land itself of France would be safe — no more invaded. The fierce light could reach no deeper in him than this knot of lust and faith, inextricably tangled. It did not even reach the child who used to roll in the earth itself, trembling with love of it, of its warmth, scents, richness. . . .

Although Woerth had never spoken to him of his plans, he suspected them. He determined, as soon as he was in the Government himself, to get rid of him. In the meantime, he would warn the proper German authority.

The telephone rang again. This time it was Woerth's Personal Assistant, Colonel Stoffel, to tell him that Piriac had sent three tank groups across the bridge to reinforce Colonel Ollivier; he had also given orders for the Geulin bridge to be destroyed at eight o'clock. . . .

The general got up at once — he must see Piriac and have the orders countermanded. Thiviers left with him.

The sky had clouded over; a light warm rain was falling. At the corner of the Quai d'Angers, the car had to creep round people standing outside the terrace of the Café Buran;

there was a wireless, dumb at the moment. The crowd had an air of waiting, suppliants in a furtive tragedy, for the priest to speak and tell it why it was being punished, and its children and houses, and denounce the guilty. In these faces there was no understanding, only bewilderment and bewildered relief. Two lost soldiers, loosed towards the barracks by the military police, were waiting there with the rest. One of them caught sight of Woerth.

Either ashamed of himself, or out of bravado, he shouted, "You could at least have given us a few guns." The other swung round, hiding his face. Woerth did not glance at them.

"I've just learned," Thiviers said, "that the officer commanding the troops at my works is a Lieutenant Aulard. I happen to know — and from Monsieur Bergeot himself — that he holds very unsound views. I should say he was completely unreliable."

Woerth folded his hands. "I'll see to it."

Chapter 78

As soon as his visitors had gone, Labenne rang.

"Is Monsieur Vayrac waiting? Send him in."

From the window in the next room, Vayrac had watched Thiviers and the general cross the courtyard. He wondered how much longer these two would think of Labenne as an ally. Not long. Where Labenne probed instantly to the weakness of a rival and pressed on it to ruin him, Vayrac's less powerful and subtler mind saw his strength. He was drawn to attack just here — partly because it was dangerous, partly because he knew that a man can recover from the humiliation of being a liar or a coward, but not from having surrendered his secret strength, it might be kindness, or a refusal of honours (in the plural), or simply a delight in being alone or obscure. If I were a Minister and wanted to ruin Woerth, he thought, I'd help him to absolute power; in six months his subordinates would be forced to get rid of his justice even if they had to guillotine him.

He went in to Labenne. "Did you see my friends?" the Mayor said, smiling. "One of them is a pious fool and the other a rascal of a general."

"One of them is enduring and the other honest," Vayrac said.

"You don't say so!" Labenne said ironically. "Why don't you add that our honest general has his uses? I'm told that the Germans are having to fight at Orléans — no doubt they'll destroy it — and that the bridges from Orléans to Nevers have been blown up. Your honest general is going to see to it that the bridge here is intact, so that the Germans can come in peacefully, as friends, without doing any damage as enemies."

"When?"

"I should think tomorrow — the 18th. . . . We shall see whether Woerth's vanity is much good to him, and how Thiviers endures being put in his place. And our dear Huet — have you discovered that he is honest? Or only charming? . . . Here, look over these notes I've made — billeting, precautions, police, and the rest of it."

Vayrac read slowly. He had been surprised by the bitterness of Labenne's hatred. He knew that the Mayor's ambition was without bounds, but he was a good father; that he could be bribed, but he was at bottom careless and mistrustful of money; that he considered himself infinitely more important than any idea — the idea of freedom, for example, or justice — but he was not vain. Yet he had just shown himself resentful and vindictive — in Vayrac's experience these were always the marks of an outraged vanity. Without looking up from his papers, he said,

"You don't trust Thiviers and the other?"

"Of course not," Labenne said calmly, "they are not small enough."

Vayrac was content. He had discovered Labenne's strength — his gift of sight: he measured men by their relative sizes, not by anything else he guessed in them, not even by their vices, which he saw and used. . . . Now if I want to assassinate you, Monsieur Labenne, I shall take care to choose a day of blinding sunlight when everything, every building, every finger-nail on a man's hand, is so clear that you look through them and don't see what is going on in my hand. . . .

"Have you finished?"

"Yes, Monsieur Labenne."

Labenne took a sheet of notepaper out of a drawer and pushed it across the desk. "No romanticism," he said quietly. "We're both sensible mature men, we don't get rid of people for frivolous reasons. But there are certain men in Seuilly who must be made harmless. I'm not in favour of imprisonment at the present time, it has always seemed to me one of the indulgences a society can afford itself when it is perfectly secure. In times of breakdown like this it's much wiser to make sure of your opponents — even the unimportant ones. . . . And when the Germans will shoot them for us. . . . I want you to write down some names. No, no, not names like Woerth or Huet. A man like Woerth has to be killed openly — an assassination, a bomb thrown into his car . . . in spite of all police precautions. . . . As for Huet, I can ruin our good deputy when I like." He scratched his armpit. "You can only blackmail a man once," he said meditatively.

"You think so?" Vayrac said.

"To be effective."

"What are your names?"

Labenne scratched his arms. "Yes, yes, begin. Mathieu, Louis. . . ."

When he left Labenne, Vayrac thought he might call on Mme Huet. She received him, this time, in her own sitting-room; full of bowls of white scented roses; and darkened, although it was raining, by sun-blinds. While she talked, she stripped a rose of its thorns. She tried on him all her graces of the provincial aristocrat finished in Paris. It amused him for a time. Bored, he wanted to see how she would behave when she was frightened.

"I saw your friend, Saint-Jouin, as I came here."

"Oh, he's back?" Mme Huet said, turning the rose in her fingers.

"He was acting as maid of honour to General Woerth."

"Very suitable," Mme Huet smiled.

Vayrac glanced at her. "Don't laugh at him, you're very fond of the fellow, I know that; I'm not blind."

"Perhaps not, but you're stupid, and a little ill-bred," Mme Huet said.

"You don't ask me how I knew. From Saint-Jouin himself."

He watched her eyelids quiver — that was the shock to her pride. She smiled — that was real grief. And a touch of fear. Her hands were steady, she held the rose away from her, examining it in the weak light. Very easily broken, Vayrac thought : destroy her pride, force her to submit to brutality, make her need it, neglect her and let her lie sleepless, afraid to cry because that wrinkles the eyelids, give her time to look at the ugly residue of herself but not time to do without me — until the day when I can do without her ; which pray heaven isn't too far off. . . . He took her hand. She made a slight movement, then let it lie passive.

"Saint-Jouin is a young scoundrel, without any intelligence or kindness. You have very beautiful hands, my dear . . . Andrée." It was true.

Mme Huet did not answer. She was silent not because Vayrac attracted her, nor only because she was thinking anxiously of Saint-Jouin's indiscretion. But she had felt, suddenly, the void in her life. She had made it herself when she decided to turn her back on most of her past : on afternoons in the warmth of a rough garden shaded by elms, on her music mistress tweaking her pigtail when she played wrong notes, on her first theatre, her first great man — she would never be able to say again, "The day I met Manet" — her first love-affair — with the son of the doctor in the village, he was killed in the last war — on her mother and foster-mother, on all the scattered shards buried in the oldest layers of her past, meaningless, except to her, enduring, since they alone, in her neglect of them, would survive her other memories. All these were now lost. . . . She looked up and saw Vayrac in front of her.

Chapter 79

BERGEOT was looking through papers in the room Marguerite had always called hers. It had the advantage that he could go into his own room, take an armful of files, and carry them easily the short distance to hers : the disadvantage that he knew each time she rang up — and before he heard

his secretary's voice slide from formality to a desperate coldness . . . "No, Madame, I can't disturb him, he refuses to be disturbed. No, there is no other message except the one I . . . no, Madame, he can't see anyone. . . ." Bergeot blocked his ears. Ashamed, he took his hands away and forced himself to go on reading. He heard Lucien put back the receiver. His pity for her became anger. That she could go on torturing him and herself. . . . Then exhaustion — there was nothing more he could feel.

The heap of letters and papers he intended to burn before the Germans came in — he supposed, even if Piriac did resist, that it would only be three or four days — was already large. Every letter which could bring the writer under suspicion, either by the Germans or Labenne, must be found and destroyed. The normal work of the Prefecture had stopped. When he went out of his room he saw little groups of clerks and officials standing about talking. A number of them were missing, they had left Seuilly with their families. Most of them treated Bergeot with cautious respect, but a few were markedly rude. He took no notice of either demonstration.

Suddenly he decided to telephone to Labenne about the shortage of bread — so many bakers had left. He would find out from his answers whether Labenne believed that Piriac was going to fight. After Lucien had rung up several times, the Mayor came to the telephone and said he had no time to speak to M. Bergeot.

Towards seven o'clock, one of the clerks who had left to go home came back and said the police had posted notices announcing that the Germans would enter Seuilly tomorrow. The notice ended with the terrifying words: "Citizens are advised, in their own interests, and to avoid any undue severity, to keep calm. . . ." Calm was the only emotion not started. The most sensible, the calmest, were the first to begin running home to collect their goods and families. It means us, they said — what they had seen printed was the sum of their repressed fears. The clerk said that in one street, where the people had broken into shops in search of food to take with them, soldiers were keeping order.

Furious, Bergeot telephoned to the police. The only person able to speak to him was a certain Inspector Drigeard. Bergeot ordered him to remove the notices.

"They came from the Town Hall," Drigeard answered politely: "the Mayor gave the order to post them."

"I am cancelling the Mayor's order."

"No one," Drigeard said, "could be sorrier than I am to doubt whether you are in a position to give orders."

Before Bergeot could reply, he was cut off. His anger was frozen in him by despair and his feeling of humiliation. Leaving his papers, he went into Lucien's room and sat there without moving, almost without thinking. His mind had ceased to be in touch with his feelings.

His secretary went on turning over the files, trying to pick out the incriminating letters and documents. He mistrusted his knowledge. But he was afraid to talk to Bergeot. A little after nine o'clock, the porter came upstairs, and beckoned him.

"What is it?" Lucien asked.

For answer, the old man drew him out of the room towards the stairs. "I can't manage her," he murmured, "you must come. . . ." Mme de Freppel had followed him. She was coming slowly along the corridor. As soon as she saw Lucien she quickened her step and marched on him. Lucien drew back. Desperate and ridiculous, he stood in the doorway of the Prefect's room; he was crimson, his heart seemed to be beating at the back of his knees. He looked anywhere but at her face. She was wearing a fur cloak; he looked at the drops of rain glittering on it.

"Where is the Prefect?"

"He's not working in his room — for the very reason that he doesn't want to be interrupted——"

"That's enough," Mme de Freppel said. "Tell him I'm here."

"I can't."

"Are you trying to keep me out?" Mme de Freppel said, with contempt. "You must have gone off your head — or are you playing at soldiers? Tell Monsieur Bergeot at once."

Lucien was surprised by his indifference to her. "I can't," he repeated; "the Prefect's orders——"

"Lucien," Mme de Freppel said, in a gentler voice, "look at me."

He looked, and saw a worn face, almost ugly. His indifference melted in pity: stammering terribly, he tried to tell her that she must go away for her own sake, when the

Germans came they wouldn't let anyone leave, she would be trapped.

"And do you think I'm going to leave without seeing him — without one word? What you must think of me!"

The young man defended himself against this voice with difficulty. He was in despair. It was despair that made him — when she laid her hand on his arm and asked, "Why can't I come in?" — answer,

"For the sake of Seuilly."

Mme de Freppel took her hand away and boxed his ear with it. She had an astonishing force in her wrists. It threw Lucien off his balance for a moment; during this moment she sprang past him into the Prefect's empty room and ran to look in her own. It, too, was empty. She came back into the middle of Bergeot's and looked round her with eyes reflecting nothing. Lucien watched in horror. He had never felt so incapable. The responsibility he thought he had gained deserted him; he was only ashamed of his efforts to defeat her. Have I the right? he thought, trembling. He felt himself ignorant, a lout. An obstinacy deeper in him than his pity and even than his feeling of shame kept him from speaking. Mme de Freppel did not look at him again. She went just outside the door, into the corridor.

"Émile!" she called. "Émile!"

Lucien shuddered. If this is a tragedy, it is almost bestial, he thought. He tried not to listen.

Mme de Freppel came back into the room. Now she seemed calmer; its dullness was leaving her face; she looked simply unhappy and anxious. She took off her fur cape and, handling it as if it were a child, laid it on a chair.

"Tomorrow, you'll see that this is returned to Caillemer's," she said drily. "I can't pay for it."

Lucien heard the Prefect's steps in the corridor. She heard them at the same time and did not move. Bergeot came in, looking at her. They stood and looked at each other in silence.

Neither of them heard Lucien go out clumsily, knocking against the chairs. He blundered along the passage without noticing that the porter was still there. "Yes, you may cry," the old man grumbled. So that is what's the matter with me, Lucien thought, as if it explained everything. . . .

Bergeot, too, was seeing a worn tired woman, almost ugly. But he saw a woman he had made ugly and unsure of her-

self — without recognising the pleasure this gave him. He pitied her and did not move towards her. Even if it would comfort her — it did not occur to him that it might — he felt drily that it was foolish to take this beaten disappointed woman in his arms.

"My poor girl," he said.

"You were going to let me go alone," she answered in a rough voice. "Why?"

Bergeot made a despairing gesture. "How could I live with myself if I bolted the day before the Germans attack Seuilly?"

She caught the echo of Rienne's voice. Even in her exhaustion, she was too adroit to speak about him. That would only bring him into the room against her. "But what can you do here?" she said, with an air of simplicity.

"Nothing."

He expected her to cry out against his selfishness, scold him for putting his false honour before their happiness and the whole of their life together: he stiffened himself to endure contempt, anger, pleading. But she looked at her hands and said in a humble voice,

"Did you think I could drive myself all the way to Hendaye? I'm such a bad driver."

He had never thought about this. Disgusted with himself, and overcome by bitterness — it seemed the only feeling left him — he cried,

"I'm no good. I'm not good enough. Anyone else — Bonamy, Louis Mathieu — would have made something out of this crisis. I'm not big enough for it. It has found me out."

And you too, he thought, looking at her. We have both come to the end of our cleverness. The war, circumstance, fate — call it what you like — yes, fate is refusing us another chance to show how adroit we are, how subtly we handle people. No more adroit triumphs. Disappointment, failure, anguish of mind . . . and, my poor girl, your looks. . . .

"We could still be happy," she said timidly.

"Do you think I want to stay?" Bergeot said bitterly. "I've made a failure of everything. All I want is to go away. Never see any of these brutes again."

Marguerite's face changed. "So it was your vanity made you agree to go away?" she said. "It wasn't" — she was ashamed to say — "love." Her mouth stretched in an

awkward taunting smile. "Your vanity," she repeated.

He was speechless with anger. "What difference does it make?" he said at last.

"Only that everything is spoiled."

"And you," he said, hating her, "you hadn't spoiled it already? With your Thiviers."

Their bitterness, their hatred of one another, forced them together. Almost weeping, they fell into each other's arms. Bergeot felt that their bones were embracing. Only two such ruined cowardly people could love each other in this way, without pity. Yet he had never been so anxious to look after her. . . . And she — at this moment she knew that no one had defeated her. She had defeated herself; she had told too many lies, the stain of greed and trickery was fixed in her. A life of some sort, somewhere — that was all that was left.

She thought confusedly: Only let us get safely away, I'll change, I'll be honest and kind.

"We ought to go," she stammered. "I packed some of the clothes you had at home. I couldn't find any of your share certificates, or the money you drew out."

"They're here."

He watched her push papers and banknotes into his despatch case. Suddenly he remembered the pile of letters in the next room; he knew there were a great many more in his files and began desperately looking for them. Marguerite was impatient, then anxious. She said she could hear guns. Bergeot listened, and thought after a moment that there was a distant shudder — not closer, he felt sure, than Orléans. . . . She became frantic with fear. She snatched the file he was holding, threw it on the table, and hurried him towards the door. He gave way. It was no use — why try to save everybody? He found himself yawning, and yawning.

When they were going down the stairs, Marguerite hesitated. "I've forgotten my fur cape," she said. She ran back and fetched it.

Lucien watched them from the other end of the corridor. I might as well, he thought, have gone into the tank corps. Is it too late?

It was raining heavily. As Rienne crossed the High Street he was almost run down by a car swerving clumsily

round a corner. He caught sight of the driver. It was Marguerite, and she was smiling. She was, he thought, alone, but her smile promised nothing good. In any case, what goodness could come of a day on which German guns had fired into Orléans — *Orléans et tout l'avant d'Orléans ; la Touraine ; la grâce et le douceur tourangelles* — and forced the Loire ? It was worse than defeat ; it was a gross stain, spreading so quickly that you could think the sources everywhere had been poisoned — today Saône, Doubs, Loire, tomorrow it would be Cher, Creuse, Vienne, Rhône. . . . And the Loire would not be defended at Seuilly. When he reported at six o'clock, Piriac had Woerth and Woerth's Personal Assistant with him. Without turning his head, he growled, "What do you want ? Get out." The P.A. looked down and smiled. . . . Rienne went back to his room : a message from Ligny told him that the three tank groups sent to reinforce Colonel Ollivier had been withdrawn, and the order to destroy the Geulin bridge cancelled. He knew what Ollivier was thinking.

His servant had fastened the shutters and lit the reading-lamp on his table. For the first time in his life in barracks, the smallness of his room stifled him. He must hear whatever sounds France was giving out in the darkness — they would be the sounds of her Middle Age, of the chroniclers, the villages burning, the women lying in the streets with their fear and their children. Turning the lamp out, he opened shutters and window, and leaned against any night in the war, in any war. It was still raining. Under his window the courtyard was full of soldiers, waiting, with a little patience, their turn to file through the guard-room and give names, units, and if they could remember it the date and place where they ceased to be part of a battalion and became a few stragglers. A little light, reflected in the rain, spread from the door of the room. Squatting in it, four men were playing belotte. The voices of the others came up to Rienne from some defeat of the past. . . . "He isn't as bad as you'd think, the old Boche." . . . "I was lying on one grave and firing across the next — Dead for France, October 16, 1917, Jean Durand — Any minute now, my boy, I said, you'll be dead yourself, and for what ? For some bloke to come here again in twenty years and plant a machine-gun in your bones ; he'll be too sorry for himself to care what happened to Jean Durand and Jean Duchamp,

he'll say *merde* and forget us." . . . " Our lieutenant hopped it the third night, leaving us in the cart." . . . " We've been properly sold." . . . " Two of our officers were killed, and the general, no one knew why he was there, he had a car somewhere, said, Get back and blow up the bridge, the bridge must be blown up. And went off. And the captain said he knew the bridge was mined, it only needed one man to set it off, and if he didn't come back in half an hour, to push off ; we waited an hour and pushed off." . . . " You prayed for a Boche ? " . . . " Of course, why not, he was dead. . . ."

Rienne did not blame these soldiers for running away ; a group of brave men is not an army. . . . As the courtyard emptied slowly, the darkness fell silent. There were now no sounds, neither from defeated nor invaders. In silence, the rest of Europe drew away from France. Everything was spoiled. Towns had been burned, even Thouédun had lost its oldest houses, its youngest children. . . . And the solitude, the desertion, the loneliness were exhilarating. The night, with the rain, was clear and fresh.

Chapter 80

JUNE the 18th. In the morning, at eight o'clock, Ligny sent for him.

The general had had himself moved to a room on the ground floor, and a superb bed and other furniture fetched from his house at Bourges. He pointed out that he was dying in the greatest comfort possible.

"I shouldn't like to deprive Piriac of a single word of his legend," he said, with a fine smile. "Let him die in his camp-bed and bequeath it to the nation. I prefer my own."

The doctor had assured him that in a hospital on the south coast he could be mended to last ten years. He refused to go. . . . Rienne spoke to him about it.

"My dear boy," Ligny said, "I'm sixty-two, an age which is usually fatal to the males of my family. The

women live to be centenarians or die in infancy. Another of our habits is to leave all the extremes of feeling and character to them ; some of them have been saints and the rest diabolically clever or spiteful or good-looking ; none were what you could call friendly. Not one of them, man or woman, is alive, I've outlived even the centenarians. I'd like to know how Woerth's mathematics explains it. . . . The long ridge you can just see under the sheet is one of Charlemagne's barons, the last. Look at my nose — one of Louis the Eleventh's Lignys brought it from Tunis with the twelve-year-old girl he married there. She lived to be a hundred and three ; it was she who started the habit. Very well, I'm taking it back to her, since no one has any further use for it in France. I ask you what use the country has for a Ligny ? I'm what your friend the Prefect would call a Black. I ought to be clamouring for a King. I prefer the Republic. We Lignys have good memories and a longer experience of kings than these journalists and little Counts who make a good thing of their royalism. I daresay they are only fit to serve a tyrant. . . . You can see why I prefer to die here, in comfort. . . . But I sent for you to talk seriously. Open the windows. . . .”

His room looked on to the rough field behind the barracks. It was a clear day after the rain — with a sky which had got back its colour, and was letting torrents of light fall from gulfs sunk deeply between mountains of white cloud.

“ I have two things to say to you. First : Piriac will hand Seuilly over to the Germans without any attempt to make things difficult for them. Your friend — I think he's your friend ? — Colonel Ollivier — will get his orders this morning to withdraw all his tanks and anti-tank guns and the rest of it into the town during the day. My impression is that Piriac expects the Germans to come in this afternoon or evening——”

“ We should have fought here,” Rienne said.

After a moment Ligny said, “ No.”

“ Why not, sir ? ”

“ The army has been defeated. The only humane course is to surrender at once. The only possible course.” He looked at Rienne and added, “ You are a little like me — except for my remotely great-grandmother's nose — why don't we think alike ? You don't agree with me.”

“ No,” Rienne said.

"You're stubborn. You forget that this has become a war on civilians — and that civilians are not soldiers."

"They could have been auxiliaries," Rienne said.

"You're wrong! They could only suffer, and — since we've been defeated — why should they? My boy, you are as out-of-date as I am, with the difference that you expect everyone to be as obstinate, as single-minded, and — forgive me for referring to it — as brave as yourself. I tell you that this is a mediaeval war with modern weapons. Which makes it quite intolerable."

"And no doubt your memory and experience of mediaeval wars——" Rienne said, smiling.

"Is closer than yours," Ligny said, with sudden energy. "You're an insubordinate fellow. I haven't time to argue. . . . I sent for you to warn you that Woerth will certainly get rid of you. He may even have you shot for treason — I have no idea how far he is likely to push his distaste for a Republican staff officer. What are you smiling at?"

"Your distaste for General Woerth."

"He's a fanatic," Ligny said. "No, a Jesuit — polite, inflexible, and with a single passion. He's learned nothing since the eighteenth century, when the Jesuits were expelled. A pity. France hasn't wasted her time during the two centuries he knows nothing about. . . . What was I saying? He'll be the death of you."

"I've been dead so many times," Rienne said gaily.

"This isn't war. It's politics. Much more deadly. . . . You must get away — tonight or tomorrow. . . . I'm not joking. . . . You can do nothing here, you're a soldier, only good for fighting. The English — they're simpler than we are — will fight." His face contracted. "Make your plans quickly, my boy. Go there and help them."

Rienne did not answer. He was surprised to find that during the night his mind had thought of nothing else. And if, when he woke, nothing of the debate remained except a wish to see Agathe and Thouédun, it was because his memory knew already that he would be seeing them for the last time. Turning his head to look at Ligny, he thought: And you too — and this field, and that roof. And the im- placable and firm line of the Loire.

"Have I the right to leave France?"

"Have you," Ligny cried, "the right to stay? When

others are still fighting? Does it matter who it is, the English, or some other nation which has forgotten what it is like to be defeated? . . . No, no, you must go on fighting. I want your word."

Rienne hesitated long enough to become used to the idea that France was leaving him, not he France.

"Very well," he said. "I'll get away tonight." With Michel, he said to himself.

Sighing, Ligny folded his hands across his chest in the gesture which no doubt he would be returning in a few days to its Crusading owner. His eyes sparkled with relief and malice.

"And don't let's deceive ourselves," he murmured, "it's not our faults, it's not even the gross traitors, the Monsieur Labennes, who are responsible for our defeat. It's much more the excellent Monsieur de Thiviers. Have you heard him talking about sacrifice? We're both lucky — we shall soon be out of hearing. . . . He has his own definition of sacrifice. Of course. He prides himself on his definitions. He's not thinking of devotion. Or of the modesty that drives a civilised man to prefer Chartres or justice or a small vineyard to his own life. No, no, he means forced labour! He believes that the strength will come back to our country from the poor and helpless, when they submit to his idea of their duty. What an illusion! The Pyramids were built by slaves, and who, I ask you, can honestly admire them? — they're ridiculous. Only Germans — who see in them the image of their own megalomania. Free men built into Chartres the purest anonymous genius of all ages. What people would give freely to preserve a banker or a politician? Without knowing it, our people prefer to die out; they know very well what is human and what is only a machine of greed, efficiency, power. Even if Thiviers is kind to his slaves, they will die. What they want is the right to work when they're not arguing, to hate foreigners and admit five million of them, to create the finest paintings in the world and the most repellent houses — not simply the right to eat. . . . I've eaten one meal in my life which I remember as perfect. In Tunis. We had been left behind . . . never mind that . . . we were three days without food; on the fourth we reached an outpost, very poorly stocked, but a soldier gave me half a bottle of red wine and a loaf. It was marvellous. . . ."

"Monsieur de Thiviers isn't on the General Staff," Rienne said, smiling.

"Good God, don't imagine I'm excusing our Woerths. Woerth's idea of war as arithmetic — do you suppose he would have clung to it if it hadn't been fashionable? — has been fatal. In any situation where he was outnumbered, he would see nothing for it but surrender. . . . My memory is twelve hundred years longer than his. I could tell him that a country, like an army, is more than its numbers. It's a fountain of spirit — if you don't mind the word, of love. Woerth's friends at G.H.Q. forgot it. The Government forgot it. No doubt Governments always do. But if they had known how to call it out, it would have saved them. . . . I don't underrate Woerth. He's an honest Government official, a good office soldier. . . . I'm talking to you too long. It's because this is the last time any of my family can speak. After this, none of them will be able to prefer black honey, or amuse himself by walking about in the rain, or reading a book backwards. . . . They all talked too much and remembered everything they had seen. The silence, the forgetfulness, of the Lignys is beginning. . . ."

"Your doctor warned me not to let you talk," Rienne said.

"What a brute! And I was going to give you my views on generals. On Piriac — who was at Verdun with our good Marshal. . . . I've often wondered in what sense Piriac was at Verdun. I know he was there in the body. His mind was probably back at the Staff College trying to puzzle out the connection between duty and promotion. Seventy years of blameless living will have reached their climax when he meets the German commander tonight or tomorrow. I can't see into his mind — we Lignys have only the eyes we were born with, excellent for watching an eagle and short-sighted with human beings. It spares me the pain of trying to be just to them. I shall continue to the last minute to be prejudiced and to detest the people I have always detested. Not a chance that in a last moment I shall let myself become forgiving, or credit Woerth with his honesty. . . . I detest generals. What makes us really intolerable is that the highest posts are always held by men who could offend nobody — not even the enemy. We have a high idea of ourselves, we believe in the grandeur of our rôle. Many of us, for good measure, believe in astrology or in running

before breakfast. To balance this credulity, we believe very little in our fellow-men. We suspect them of plotting against us, and prefer our own plots. Perhaps a man with an instinct for authority, whose business is killing men, is forced to be jealous and mistrustful one minute and over-confident the next. . . . Forgive me, my dear boy. After all, you're not a general. Your cunning or your rigidity must be flawed, your opinions are not reassuringly mediocre, you haven't made the right friends, you don't give enough thought to agreeing with your superiors. In short, to the disadvantages you were born with, your intelligence and an obscure name, you had the lunacy to add convictions and an indocile nature. I'm only surprised you've got so far as you have. . . . Now you must leave me."

His voice was using up the remains of his life. Either it was as he said — the Lignys were seizing their last chance to enjoy the light. Or he was wilfully exhausting himself. Rienne had made no attempt to keep him quiet. He was willing to listen until Ligny was silenced, or himself arrested.

"I have plenty of time," he said.

"You have very little time. Go now."

"I don't like leaving you."

"Good heavens, what a thing to say!" Ligny mocked.

"You mean you don't like the idea of leaving France."

"Almost the same thing."

"Thanks for France! But don't worry. We shall both be here when you come back. You don't really imagine that the Germans can take our place? They are so unamiable. Their scientists have no vestige of wit, their writers no gaiety, their upper classes no manners; their statesmen have never doubted that it is clever to lie and massacre. Every other people commits some of the crimes of Germany, but none with such pedantic arrogance. The world can't really prefer these dull butchers of ideas and nations to our lucidity and our simple omelettes. And they bawl so about the glory of dying — as if it weren't the simplest and commonest of human tricks. They have no modesty. . . . No, no, my dear child, you'll come back and drink the wine of our old vineyards. You'll find me content, almost happy. If I must be silent, at least I shall be enjoying a silence I understand."

Rienne felt a sharp grief.

"I'd like to stay here a few days. You don't really want to be left alone with the Germans and Piriac."

"I shan't see any Germans," Ligny said lightly. "Nothing so trying could happen to me on such a day. Look at the sky, my child."

Chapter 81

PIRIAC was not in the barracks. After the bombing, he had moved to Mme Huet's château on the edge of Seuilly. As soon as he left Ligny, Rienne went there. He asked to see the commander-in-chief. Piriac sent word down that he would see him in an hour; he was to wait.

He waited — from eleven o'clock until two. When at last he was sent for he found the general in a large luxuriously furnished room. In one corner, the iron bedstead from his room in the barracks. . . . It was the Napoleonic legend: only the content was missing — not easy to lodge in this man who did not believe in France.

Piriac was alone. He looked at Rienne with a blank face. "What do you want?"

"I was not able to report to you yesterday——"

"What have you to report?" Piriac interrupted. "I don't want to see you. Is there something you want to ask me?"

Rienne ignored an impulse to say: Yes, why the camp-bed? With severe respect, he said,

"Yesterday morning you gave me certain orders. Later they were cancelled, but I was not informed. Is it in fact true that Seuilly is to be surrendered?"

Surprising him, the general said slowly, almost gently,

"I must spare people as much as possible."

Is he genuinely moved? Rienne wondered. He had not forgotten Piriac's callousness with his servant. But there was the legend of his humanity — it had to be given a content of some sort. Why not this anonymous pity, for people who were not necessary to him? It was not hypocrisy. He had realised that Piriac was sincerely and deeply convinced that resistance was useless — and the reason. An old man, his instincts were warning him silently every minute that he could not resist death much longer, and he confused

Seuilly with himself, France with himself. In his eyes France was a tired heavy body housing without joy a slow mind.

"Pétain knows me very well," the general said. "We are old friends, he is sure to send for me. I shall have my place in the better nation we are going to bring up. And you — you will have your duties."

Rienne said coldly, "Even if I were the only soldier to refuse — I shan't be — I should refuse to take part in a dishonest surrender."

A gleam of suspicion came into Piriac's eyes, bringing them to life. "What's that, what are you hinting at? A revolt?"

"No, sir," Rienne said. He knew it was useless to ask another question, but he asked it, to leave a tidy room. "A month ago, you gave me a general order to arrange for the withdrawal, in certain circumstances, of our reserve of tanks. The circumstances are here. So are the tanks. Will you allow me to put the plan into effect?"

Piriac looked at him, bewildered. "There's no time."

"We have time to send them away, or destroy them."

Piriac let his head fall forward. "Do you know what day it is?" he said in a grumbling voice. "It's the anniversary of the day I joined Pétain's staff at Verdun. . . . You don't remember Verdun. . . ."

"I remember Joffre's order of the day," Rienne said soberly. "*Hold on at any cost. Any leader who gives the order to retire will be court-martialled.*"

The look of dismay and anguish on Piriac's face was momentary; it flashed and went out, after it had lit up for a second a countryside of arid cliffs and misshapen trees. There was only an old man talking drily about his duty. ". . . I'm confident I shall be able to influence the German commander. As a soldier, he will talk one of my languages." He smiled with an exhausted simplicity. "The other is French — I think I still have a trace of my Bordelaise accent. Perhaps I shall teach him a little."

Rienne did not speak.

"You can go," Piriac said.

On his way to the barracks, Rienne decided to make one more attempt to save the unused tanks from falling to the Germans — in either of Piriac's languages. He managed to see Woerth. Woerth listened coldly while with an equal

coldness Rienne argued for their destruction.

"You exaggerate the importance of what is happening now," he said. "I'm convinced that, for the present, our worst enemy — and the enemy responsible for our defeat — is Bolshevism, not Germany. We shall need our tanks here."

"We shan't be allowed to keep them," Rienne said. He was vexed to feel himself losing his temper.

Woerth looked at him with a curious interest, as if they were meeting after an incident which had been awkward for them both. He is thinking of the day when he will court-martial me, Rienne said to himself. It amused him and restored his good-humour.

"You don't appreciate the position," Woerth said. "We have lost the war. Our only hope lies in cutting out of France its moral cancer. After that we can think of defeating the Germans. We're defending, now, the future of the country. Surely you would agree that it must be defended?"

"By honourable means," Rienne said.

"By any means."

Rienne was enjoying his calm. This might be the last time he would talk to the other France, to a Frenchman whose patriotism forced him to deny a century and a half of sacrifices and effort and feel a grudge against the hopes and loyalties of millions of his dead countrymen who died in the illusion that theirs was the true France. He said, smiling,

"But that makes honour another word for self-interest. Must we speak German? Neither of us has been brought up to it."

"I realise that the high command has not the honour of your approval," Woerth said.

Rienne smiled again. "Because we can't hold France is no reason for not making the enemy pay to the last day for their conquest. And we have an Empire — and a fleet. Surrendering before we are beaten . . . we are betraying France."

"You're mistaken," Woerth said coldly. "It is a way, the only way, of saving the real France."

Rienne gave way to a childish impulse. "Oh, if I'm talking to a politician, I'll be quiet. I know nothing about politics."

Woerth stood up. Had he had enough of his comedy?

"You can go. But report to me this evening, at seven o'clock."

Chapter 82

RIENNE went back to his room. His servant came in with a letter which had been left half an hour since. Opening it, he found an army form; on the back of it Ollivier had scrawled, "Come and die here. Michel."

It was three o'clock. He must, after all, force himself again on Émile. When he saw him he had not been thinking of England — it was an unnatural thought! — and he had believed, or at worst hoped, that Seuilly would be defended: he had seen no choice for Émile between staying and running away with Marguerite to America. . . . If Ligny is right, I am nearly stupid enough to be a general, he thought: I should have decided on England last night; I should have gone back and advised him to go there. Not as a politician — he must have had enough of ill-health — as a soldier of the last war, who can begin again. . . . He was careful not to put into words his idea that Émile would need his help to become a soldier. . . .

There was something he had to do first. When he sent Lieutenant Aulard to guard Thiviers's aircraft works he had given him an unwritten order, if the Germans got into Seuilly, to damage the machinery as much as possible before he withdrew his men. He must see Aulard. . . . Turning into the High Street, he caught sight of Lucien Sugny; he stopped and beckoned the young man. Lucien was controlled and pale. He had, he said, tried to see Rienne that morning. "You may not know," he went on in a composed voice, "that the Prefect left Seuilly last night, with Madame de Freppel. The Prefecture is full of Labenne's clerks who are taking away letters and papers. . . . Is it too late for me to fight?"

"No," Rienne said, "not if you leave France at once."

Lucien looked at him without surprise, and without a word. Rienne advised him brusquely to get to the coast before the Germans, and try for England. It was a little over a month since he had promised Lucien to help him into the army. How lucky for Lucien that he had not kept his promise! Luckier than millions of his fellows, whom he had envied, who would be trapped, he could fight, he could

still be killed. With luck of another sort, he could even return to a country he had not lived in as a prisoner. . . . He watched Lucien hurry away, carrying his freedom. Émile — he sent Émile to wait his turn, with Pierre and Marie, until the end of the war, or until the day when to his surprise he noticed that each of them had made his own arrangements to live peaceably with him. . . .

He was vexed with himself for not asking Lucien if he needed money.

Aulard's men were quartered in a garage. As he approached it, an officer was coming out. It was Woerth's P.A., Colonel Stoffel, an officer towards whom Rienne felt one of those antipathies which are a delicate pleasure. "What do you want?" Stoffel asked. "Aulard? I removed him yesterday. He's under arrest."

"Why?"

"I can't give you the information," Stoffel said.

His insolence was deliberate; Rienne understood that he was being provoked to say something which might harm Aulard. He said nothing, and walked back to his car, leaving Stoffel the honours of the garage — from which at this moment a sergeant came out with his arm through half a dozen circular loaves, and said, "The German tanks are eighty kilometres away, at La Flèche."

Stoffel answered automatically, "La Flèche is seventy-eight point eight kilometres."

He has been well trained by Woerth, Rienne thought. He was delighted; then grieved that he would not be able to repeat it to Ligny.

He had still to see Mathieu. Not only was Mathieu in danger; but even if he were not shot, his work was finished. This Jew was the most uncompromising of Frenchmen. There would be no place in Labenne's Seuilly for his strict and arrogant passion.

When he walked in, Mathieu was pushing a notebook into his pocket. "I was coming to see you," he said at once, "to ask you to take this out of the country with you. It's everything I have been able to find out about Labenne."

"What made you suppose I was leaving?"

"It's quite clear what is going to happen," Mathieu said curtly. "This Government of stocks and stones will be kicked over; another will fly to North Africa and fight from there. We have a million and a half troops in Africa and

Syria — and with all we can get out of the country——”

He was speaking with such dry ardour that for a moment Rienne believed him. Only for a moment. Strange — that Mathieu who had all along had his eyes open on disaster, did not recognise it. Was it because, at the last minute, all he had so far overlooked in France — the shapes and colours of the roofs, the taste of her bread, all that web of scents, sounds, savours, which his country throws over a child before he learns to speak, and Mathieu had ignored — had slipped between him and the truth? So that now he saw only France, and her courage and generosity, and nothing of her failure — nothing at all of her disgrace? With a little anguish, Rienne lifted his hand to drive away the image. It was too late for Mathieu to notice the smile on the perfect lips; his idol was at last, in the same moment when he saw it breathe, only stone.

“You’re deceiving yourself,” he said drily. “The politicians will do nothing. They have given in — like the generals. I came here to tell you that I’m going to try to reach England — and ask you to come with me.”

Mathieu looked at him with a slight smile.

“I couldn’t possibly live in England,” he said. “I’ve only once been out of France . . . it was a mistake.”

“If you stay here,” Rienne said, “either the Germans will get rid of you — or Labenne will.”

Mathieu was scarcely listening. He lifted his hand in the familiar gesture. “You say this is really capitulation? Do you know what you’re saying? No, I’m sorry — of course you do. Besides, I knew.”

“The war will go on, under other leaders. England——”

“You can keep your England!” Mathieu cried. He was discovering other tones and gestures neglected in his childhood, which he could use now. “I couldn’t stand the damp.”

“But if they fight — and whether they care about us or not——”

“Why shouldn’t they fight for us?” Mathieu said simply. There were, he knew, Frenchmen who needed to balance their image of France with some other country — always with some country, never the sea, which would do as well and without expecting loans. It was senseless. The other peoples were in debt to France already for her refusal to alter the measure she used to keep machines and theories

exactly to scale with human instincts. To refuse to help her was dishonest. Alas, as he knew, also an instinct.

Rienne looked at him with a smiling impatience. "Do you believe I know better than you do what is happening?"

"Yes," Mathieu said — after a moment.

"Then you'll come with me?"

"You don't even know how long you'll be away——"

Rienne burst out laughing. "We're not discussing a holiday! What do you think? I don't count on coming back."

Mathieu moved his head stiffly. "I can't come. . . . I don't think they'll kill me: they'll arrange for me to die quietly of hunger by seeing to it that I've no job. . . . In England, I should die of another hunger. Besides, England doesn't want me, a half-crippled intellectual — she has her own. She wants soldiers. . . . I may still be some use here — even with my name."

If my name had been Bergeot! he thought. A month ago he would have said it: a little late, he was also discovering kindness.

Rienne recognised an obstinacy which even had something childish in it — a child who clung to his own place, mistrusting his power to make any other warm enough to live in. It was useless to argue. And he had no time. He stood up.

"There are fifteen thousand people in Seuilly," Mathieu said suddenly. "If we had shot two or three of them — civilians — the generals don't matter now; it won't be generals who will resist. . . . No! If we had shot only one — but five, ten years ago."

"Who?"

"Labenne, of course."

Rienne looked at him, and at the room which Mathieu had never troubled to make comfortable — because he despised comfort, and because he was in nothing so Jewish as in his austerity. It was as ugly and disobliging as Mathieu himself, and as French — of all peoples the least obliging.

"Goodbye," he said.

Mathieu smiled.

Chapter 83

RIENNE was stopped at the first bridge by a lieutenant who asked for his pass. What pass? General Woerth's orders. No one was to cross the bridges, not even the first bridge, to the island, unless he had a pass. The houses on the island and the north bank had been cleared of their inhabitants the day before; a woman who had forgotten to bring her parrot was weeping loudly and abusing a sergeant, he defended himself by telling her that the general was fond of birds and if she called at the barracks would certainly give her a pass. . . . A long line of Ollivier's tanks and armoured cars was moving, slowly enough, across the bridges.

"I'll write my own pass," Rienne said. He tore a page from his notebook. The young officer watched uneasily: he was relieved when, just as Rienne handed him the piece of paper, a car arrived with Colonel Stoffel. The P.A. snatched the paper, glanced over it, and tore it across.

"I think you know the meaning of an order," he said drily.

"I know the meaning of this order," Rienne said.

"Well?"

"I propose to take no notice of it."

He stepped past the two officers, and began walking across the bridge with his unhurried stride. He half expected — so pointed was Stoffel's contempt — to be fired at. But Stoffel contented himself by saying, "Leave him. He'll be dealt with."

Tanks, anti-tank guns and trucks were still crossing, but he could see the end of the column, not a great way beyond Ollivier's headquarters. The machine-gun posts at the side streets were gone. . . . It was a quarter to five. As he approached the house, Ollivier came out and stood looking up the road to the north. His shoulders and body were bent slightly forward, as though he were using all his weight against a still invisible enemy. He turned round and saw Rienne.

"Bonamy!" he cried joyfully. "Now we're off."

"I hope so," Rienne murmured. He had only to move his arms to try on a happiness that fitted him as though it

had been made for him. He moved them.

"Did you get my message?" Ollivier said. "Of course you did. You're in time for the best act. The Boche and his tanks can't be more than ten kilometres away.

"And yours——?"

"What about mine?"

"Are on their way into Seully."

A gleam of shrewd malice in Ollivier's eyes, the look which infuriates a townsman when he sees it in the eyes of a peasant he has been advising. "I had my orders this morning," he said. "I didn't waste any time. I started off the non-combatant units first, the supply, kitchen, radio trucks. Then I had my commanders and anti-tank gunners into my room and explained the position to them carefully. I told them I was prepared to stay here and use any tanks or guns — even a single one — if the crews cared to stay with me. We would do the Boche as much harm as possible, and if any of us survived he would be court-martialled for disobeying an order. I left them to talk it over and talk to their men."

"Well?"

"I have a platoon, a whole division, a corps," Ollivier cried. "I have two tanks, two 25 mm. anti-tank guns, and two 47's. And an armoured car. Everything I need for a little exercise in intellectual indiscipline. . . . The Ollivier Group. . . . Are you going to stay? One of my tanks has only its gunner, the other two went. Come and look."

He was laughing. He walked a little in front of Rienne, his head down, walking with the infantryman's short step he kept deliberately, as though it went at the pace of his thoughts. With a little effort, knowing how it irritated him to walk with someone who was out of step, Rienne fell into it. Ollivier turned his head, smiling; his eyes sparkled.

Rienne decided to speak. "But, Michel, I came to ask you to come to England with me tonight or tomorrow. The English will go on."

Ollivier stood still. He looked at his friend with the air of authority as natural to him as his malice. He was surprised, but not, Rienne saw, more than a little. He has been thinking of it, Rienne said to himself. He felt a cruel anxiety, and said nothing more.

"So you think we're done for?"

"No," Rienne said. "But we are giving up." He was not used to the idea yet.

Ollivier walked on more slowly. "Since Pétain's broadcast yesterday, I've reflected. How I admire logic. And don't give a screw for it today. We've been too clever with our famous logic, we're too proud of not being able to reason except with our minds. Logic and reason say that since we're outnumbered, out-armed, out-fought, we should admit our defeat. So much the worse for them. Our country is going into the dark because in the last ten years we reasoned ourselves out of our responsibilities. We had so many! To the rest of the world, which expected one or other of our villages to provide a great man for each decade. To our fields, which expected of us simply men. To ourselves — we expected that in a crisis there would always be one man, he might until that moment have been no better than he should be, who would save us. This time we have forgotten to arrange for him to be born. . . . We can't be saved by logic, only by acts."

Rienne saw the artery beating in his temple. Always near the surface, his blood had felt itself called on. "Go on," he said gently.

"I can't. . . . Each of us must act out of himself. Now that the centre outside has broken down. . . . I'm a soldier: when I act out of myself I fight — here. If you like — for the sake of the example. But in fact because it is all I can do; I can't write my belief in the future, I have to act it."

He smiled at Rienne. "You, too," he said. "If you are going to England, you must go now. I'm afraid it might be fatal to wait. . . ."

"I shall stay," Rienne said, instantly. He had surprised himself.

Ollivier was not surprised in the least. It was clear he had expected nothing else. "If we get through I'll come with you," he said casually. His voice changed. "Do you think I'm incapable of reasoning?" he exclaimed. "Let me tell you, I considered the position very carefully. My latest information is that we've lost Belfort and Metz, two of our fortresses, but we're still fighting in our châteaux — Tours, Blois, Orléans. The Loire is still holding. Obviously, it's common sense to fight here, as well as agreeable. . . . Why are you smiling?"

"At your tactics," Rienne said, "or do I mean your logic?" He was ready to laugh at anything. Never had he felt happier. "What a day!" he said. "Look at the sky, look at that cloud." It was a white burning bush. He stretched his arms. What a joy to stretch them again in a world that had regained the freshness and ample suavity of its youth. "*Car l'homme n'est jamais libre qu'au régiment*," he recited.

Ollivier burst out laughing. "You and your Péguy!"

They had reached the bridge. They could see the last of the anti-tank guns and tanks crossing the second bridge into Seully. They could see the trees on the south bank of the Loire, the theatre, the shabby square in sunlight, the High Street far too modest for its name. Turning their backs on this little France, they would see nearly a mile of the road north, that is, one of the roads already in the German shadow.

Ollivier had placed two of his anti-tank guns here, at the north end of the north bridge, with the armoured car as a fixed fort. His other two guns were hidden a quarter of a mile up the road, in the first side streets of this poor little northern part of Seully, given over to plane trees and workers. There were glasses on the table outside a small bistro, left there when the order came to move. . . . Thanks to Piriac, there were no defences. To get any field of fire, the anti-tank guns at the bridge had to be placed in the middle of the road. No time to dig in. Thanks again to Piriac, who had an old general's eye for detail, the sandbags were a glaring white. Looking across the river, Ollivier cursed a little. "Think what a much better run for our money we should have on that side," he said with regret. . . . Suddenly an aeroplane — German. It circled slowly, and disappeared northwards without doing more than signal to them the precariousness of their position with their backs to the river.

Rienne was looking across the bridges. "We're being reinforced."

An officer ran across the south bridge. They watched him: when he reached the second bridge, the same German aeroplane came over; he lay flat, marking for it the frontier between free and invaded France. He reached them breathless, with a message from Colonel Stoffel. Why were they hanging about? Hurry — they must hurry.

"Tell Colonel Stoffel I'm coming as fast as I can," Ollivier said.

The officer ran back a short distance, turned. "I forgot," he cried. "You're within range of the German heavy artillery."

"Many thanks," Ollivier said. "And of their planes too, I suppose."

"I'm giving you the message."

"I was sure of it. I wanted to save you coming back. You might have forgotten some other danger."

The officer went off. If he remembered that they were also menaced by anti-tank or machine-guns, he let them take their chance.

"I've a good mind to blow this bridge now," Ollivier grumbled. "I have two of my children on the island, waiting to set it off at the last minute. The question is — will they know which is the last?" He laughed, and recovered his temper. "No — we must keep a bridge open for you on England. Do you insist on any port? Dover? Newcastle? Where the devil is it, by the way? . . . My deserters — they're not such bad chaps?" he said, smiling. "They didn't give me away. . . ."

"What do you want me to do?" Rienne asked. The sun was burning his shoulders through his tunic. He moved them — it was delicious to feel his young bones move in the sun.

"Ah," Michel said, "you're under my orders. . . . You've been inside these Somuas? I'm going to drive one of them. I have my gunner. Do you think you can load a 37? Of course you can. Do you good. Take years off your rank."

The tanks were in the nearest side street. A platoon commander, Lieutenant Drouin — fair and blue-eyed, a Norman, a handsome young devil — was driving the second. He must have decided to use up in an hour his reserve of gaiety for a long life; he lodged it in his cheeks, his eyebrows, his tongue — the end of it showed between his white teeth.

While Ollivier was checking over his tank, talking to Drouin, Rienne had time to ask himself why he had stayed. It was useless, what they were doing. He had behaved with childish insanity. Only to please Michel?

Drouin parted with a few more smiles and climbed with

his crew into their tank ; he set off along a lane which would bring him into the road again nearly half a mile to the north. His orders were to attack in the rear of the first German column while Ollivier engaged it from the front. Rienne laughed ; he had recalled the day when Ollivier, answering a question in his first week at the School, began, " Offensive tactics are simple, you have only to advance. . . . "

" In with you, Bonamy. By God, you're going to wish you were two foot shorter."

Ollivier took his tank by side streets, intending to come out on the main street a little farther up. . . . For Rienne nothing was real. Heat, pressure in his eyeballs, his head, the unreal insistence of dreams. . . . A tearing clatter. . . . One of the anti-tank guns at the bridge had opened up. The German 88's, by the sound close behind their tanks, answered by shelling the south bank of the Loire — no doubt crediting the defenders with at least enough sense to be there. . . . Rienne's cramped discomfort dropped off. He felt anxious not to forget anything, as though he were going into action for the first time.

Ollivier turned into the main street. Two German tanks, ahead of the column, were coming along slowly. The guns at the bridge stopped firing, Ollivier turned left towards the tanks and stopped dead, for his gunner to fire. He missed. Ollivier zigzagged nearer, stopped. A direct hit on the turret of the German tank. It shook itself and kept on. The third shot, much lower, disabled it. Rienne loaded and sweated. . . . The second German, still about six hundred yards away, was firing. He had missed twice. . . . " Jeannot," Ollivier shouted at his gunner, " he's a worse shot than you are. . . . " Jeannot turned his turret towards the German. An anti-tank shell passed very close, and Rienne forgot where he was and ducked. Ollivier went off into a fit of malicious laughter. . . . Jeannot fired, missed. . . . Rienne was loading when the earthquake struck them. The shell passed under Ollivier's feet. No one was hurt, but the transmission had been wrecked. Talking to himself, Ollivier tried all five forward speeds. None worked. . . . " So what ? " he said. . . . Thinking he had killed them, the German had ceased firing ; no need to suppose that Germans are less logical than other people. Jeannot put his hand on the escape trap. " No, no," Ollivier said, " you'll only be holed."

The reverse gear worked stiffly, groaning. Rienne was forcing the tank backwards with his wrists and the back of his neck. The German fired without hitting them. . . . "Jeannot, my child, I begin to think better of you," Ollivier cried. . . . Jeannot fired and missed. . . . How absurd it must look from outside, Rienne thought. He had begun to suffer from the heat, and when he closed his eyes he saw the Loire rushing towards him between sandbanks. . . . The nearest side street was too far, and Ollivier crashed the tank backwards into a shop. They crawled out over tussocks of splintered wood and plaster. The guns at the bridge were firing again, and the tank, which had been roaring towards them, stopped. . . . "My good little gunners," Ollivier murmured. He sent Jeannot flying through the back door of the shop. Fumbling in his right-hand pocket he took out two small sticks of dynamite, and from the left two fuses. They must be set carefully, he told Rienne, without too much friction, or the whole thing would explode. He had the air of a schoolboy making his first experiment with two gases. He placed one stick of dynamite in the chamber of the gun, and another inside the tank on the floor. Lighting the two fuses, he seized Rienne's arm and rushed with him into the back garden. The sun struck them like a cool jet. Just as they reached the lane, the tank blew up. From Michel's face, Rienne thought he had not been sure.

The three of them ran through side streets to the bridge.

A long line of German tanks was approaching, shelling the guns at the bridge as it came. Behind the tanks, the German artillery was still firing at the south bank.

Very good for Stoffel, Rienne thought.

He lay down and watched the leading tanks dodging from side street to side street of the main road ; stopping for not more than a second, they fired one shell at the guns, then disappeared into the side street to emerge by another nearer the bridge. The gunners only caught glimpses of them, and always at a different range. . . . The two forward guns were silent. "But they kept it up for ten minutes," a man told Ollivier.

Rienne's body felt cool now and his mind lucid. Why did I stay ? he thought again. He felt the absurdity and importance of the question. Not to be able to answer it, when any moment he might stop thinking. . . . A pity. . . .

There were too many Germans. The men in the

his crew into their tank ; he set off along a lane which would bring him into the road again nearly half a mile to the north. His orders were to attack in the rear of the first German column while Ollivier engaged it from the front. Rienne laughed ; he had recalled the day when Ollivier, answering a question in his first week at the School, began, " Offensive tactics are simple, you have only to advance. . . . "

" In with you, Bonamy. By God, you're going to wish you were two foot shorter."

Ollivier took his tank by side streets, intending to come out on the main street a little farther up. . . . For Rienne nothing was real. Heat, pressure in his eyeballs, his head, the unreal insistence of dreams. . . . A tearing clatter. . . . One of the anti-tank guns at the bridge had opened up. The German 88's, by the sound close behind their tanks, answered by shelling the south bank of the Loire — no doubt crediting the defenders with at least enough sense to be there. . . . Rienne's cramped discomfort dropped off. He felt anxious not to forget anything, as though he were going into action for the first time.

Ollivier turned into the main street. Two German tanks, ahead of the column, were coming along slowly. The guns at the bridge stopped firing, Ollivier turned left towards the tanks and stopped dead, for his gunner to fire. He missed. Ollivier zigzagged nearer, stopped. A direct hit on the turret of the German tank. It shook itself and kept on. The third shot, much lower, disabled it. Rienne loaded and sweated. . . . The second German, still about six hundred yards away, was firing. He had missed twice. . . . " Jeannot," Ollivier shouted at his gunner, " he's a worse shot than you are. . . . " Jeannot turned his turret towards the German. An anti-tank shell passed very close, and Rienne forgot where he was and ducked. Ollivier went off into a fit of malicious laughter. . . . Jeannot fired, missed. . . . Rienne was loading when the earthquake struck them. The shell passed under Ollivier's feet. No one was hurt, but the transmission had been wrecked. Talking to himself, Ollivier tried all five forward speeds. None worked. . . . " So what ? " he said. . . . Thinking he had killed them, the German had ceased firing ; no need to suppose that Germans are less logical than other people. Jeannot put his hand on the escape trap. " No, no," Ollivier said, " you'll only be holed."

The reverse gear worked stiffly, groaning. Rienne was forcing the tank backwards with his wrists and the back of his neck. The German fired without hitting them. . . . "Jeannot, my child, I begin to think better of you," Ollivier cried. . . . Jeannot fired and missed. . . . How absurd it must look from outside, Rienne thought. He had begun to suffer from the heat, and when he closed his eyes he saw the Loire rushing towards him between sandbanks. . . . The nearest side street was too far, and Ollivier crashed the tank backwards into a shop. They crawled out over tussocks of splintered wood and plaster. The guns at the bridge were firing again, and the tank, which had been roaring towards them, stopped. . . . "My good little gunners," Ollivier murmured. He sent Jeannot flying through the back door of the shop. Fumbling in his right-hand pocket he took out two small sticks of dynamite, and from the left two fuses. They must be set carefully, he told Rienne, without too much friction, or the whole thing would explode. He had the air of a schoolboy making his first experiment with two gases. He placed one stick of dynamite in the chamber of the gun, and another inside the tank on the floor. Lighting the two fuses, he seized Rienne's arm and rushed with him into the back garden. The sun struck them like a cool jet. Just as they reached the lane, the tank blew up. From Michel's face, Rienne thought he had not been sure.

The three of them ran through side streets to the bridge.

A long line of German tanks was approaching, shelling the guns at the bridge as it came. Behind the tanks, the German artillery was still firing at the south bank.

Very good for Stoffel, Rienne thought.

He lay down and watched the leading tanks dodging from side street to side street of the main road ; stopping for not more than a second, they fired one shell at the guns, then disappeared into the side street to emerge by another nearer the bridge. The gunners only caught glimpses of them, and always at a different range. . . . The two forward guns were silent. "But they kept it up for ten minutes," a man told Ollivier.

Rienne's body felt cool now and his mind lucid. Why did I stay ? he thought again. He felt the absurdity and importance of the question. Not to be able to answer it, when any moment he might stop thinking. . . . A pity. . . .

There were too many Germans. The men in the

armoured car had been killed. One of them, very small, was sitting, his back against the parapet of the bridge, hands spread out to prevent himself slipping through the girders into the Loire. Of the two left at the anti-tank guns, one was killed at this moment, and the second hit in the chest. Rienne crawled to him.

"Don't worry, we'll get you back."

"Yes, sir."

"You're all right? You're not afraid?"

"I'm cold." The cold reached his knees, his lips — he smiled — his eyes. He was dead.

"Good God," Michel said quietly.

A German tank half a mile up the road had turned sideways and reeled into the ditch. Drouin's tank appeared. It drove head on into a second. The explosion sounded above the other noises, and the flames of both tanks gushed sideways to blacken the trees. The brief pause was broken by the German artillery. A shell fell on this side of the bridge. It had taken their gunners all this time to realise where the defence was. How long? Twenty minutes, or years?

"Time to go," Rienne said.

"Do you think so?" Michel said, smiling. "I would sooner stay here with my Group."

But he followed Rienne, and with Jeannot they began to crawl across the bridge. The nearest tank was giving them the benefit of its machine-guns. Rienne had forgotten the difficulty of marching on your stomach; another good little exercise. A yelp from Jeannot, whose finger had been nicked: he crawled leaving a trail of red drops, like a child who has pricked herself sewing. Michel charged into the first house on the island and threw out his two sappers. They ran, leaving a trail of playing-cards, and flung themselves on the exploder. Nothing. Cursing, they tried again — and again. Nothing. "Fuse gone," Michel said calmly. "Where are your fuses?" One of them ran to his haversack on a chair in the doorway. Michel snatched and emptied it on the step. His hand hovered for a moment over the fuses. Rienne watched the strong, rather rigid fingers spread out. With a shock of happiness he remembered Michel's hand moving across the pages of his essays, covering them with his large stiff writing, without a correction — as sure of himself as if he were holding a plough. . . .

"Wait," Michel said.

Rienne watched him run to the middle of the bridge, running against the lunatic precision of the machine-guns. Lying flat, he squeezed himself between the iron girders ; his head and half his body hanging out of sight over the river. A hand came back and felt in his pocket. "What is it ?" Rienne thought aloud. . . . "His lighter," Jeannot said. . . . Rienne turned his head. A blast. Thrown in the air, he landed on his face and hands. Pieces of girder and concrete fell round him. Then a series of tiny fragments knocking on his steel helmet. He stood up. Seizing his arm, one of the sappers pointed at the doorstep. He stammered and shook.

"Look — he took the instantaneous fuse. . . . I didn't notice. . . ." He spread his hand out over the little heap of tools and fuses.

"Come," Rienne said, "we haven't time."

With the others, he ran across the second bridge, for a few hours longer the watershed between France and Germany. At one moment a single shell dropped in front of them. No one was hurt. No doubt the account was closed for the day. They reached the Square. There was no one. No military police, no Stoffel. The shelling had torn large gaps in the road and wrecked the theatre. The hotel was not touched : an officer who had been sheltering in the cellars under the café crawled out and shouted to them. He was unintelligible. . . . Rienne walked quickly along the Quai Gambetta ; the houses had suffered, but he saw no other sign in them of life. The shelling began again. Looking over his shoulder, he saw a small boat dart out under the bridge. Two men rowed frantically ; a third, in the bows, held up a white flag. He went on ; fatigue, his head reeled, he leaned against a wall and watched the boat. The light springing back from the water hurt his eyes. Lifting them, he saw the cloud he had pointed out to Michel, the same. The immortality of clouds had begun. . . . The shelling stopped. But the Boches won't storm Seully by boat, he thought ; they won't come in at all this evening, they'll wait until tomorrow for their sappers to lay a pontoon. . . . Was it worth it, Michel ? . . . His mind cleared. He had the answer to a question which had ceased to be important. He had been wrong to think of himself as only a soldier ; he was also an individual, and the individual had reached a point where the soldier could do nothing with him, could only

leave him with his friend on a private plea of indiscipline. He felt a deep shock. After all, I am not so reliable, he said to himself. . . . He was not sorry to have found himself out.

With an effort, he remembered where he had hidden his car — in the Place de Verdun, in an empty garage. He turned to go there.

“ Ah, Michel,” he groaned. “ Why ? ”

He did not want to reproach so stubborn and smiling a shade. Searching his mind for the right words, he could only find there : Look at the sky, look at that cloud. . . . Michel burst out laughing.

Chapter 84

SHORTLY after seven o'clock he was in Thouédun. Crossing the bridge over the little river, he was forced to stop the car. His head was swimming again. He got out and leaned on the bridge, but the warmth, the calm, pressed too heavily on him ; he could not admit it into a mind still full of a weight of unreality. Michel, lighter than he was, had reached Thouédun already, though he had never seen it : dead, he must be adding his friend's memories to his own.

He passed the blackened rubble of houses destroyed in the raid. Two women and a young thin boy were working there, piling by the side of the road stones which could be used in rebuilding. They had seen a good deal of use, these stones. . . . He stopped at the vicarage. Letourneau looked at him and said, “ Why not sleep for an hour ? ” Sitting at the table, he put his head on his arms and slept. At the end of an hour Letourneau's hand on his shoulder drew him from a smooth darkness he left with reluctance, but found himself when he opened his eyes calm and restored, his mind clear. Mourey had come into the room, and Letourneau was opening a bottle of wine : he took a loaf out of his cupboard and dusted the plates with his sleeve.

Rienne told him he was leaving France : he had hoped to take a friend, Michel Ollivier — “ but he preferred to stay with his Group.” Would either of them come ?

"And leave my scandal-loving peasants?" Letourneau said, smiling. "With no priest to make fun of? Impossible." One of them, he thought, may be feeling already the awful loneliness of men without God, and could be pushed by it to despair or violence. . . . And the Germans would be in the village. Even without brutality — harder to do with than brutality — one of them might be kind; a girl or a woman might come to like him: and what then, if there were no one to explain to her that they were both the victims of their own goodness and the justice of men, and try to turn the bitterness to another Justice?

"And you, Jean?" Rienne said.

"I have my own very small place," Mourey said after a moment. "I may be wrong about us, this may be the end. If it is, I must try to save a little — by slipping it into the children's memories." For years, he thought, the heart of this rich land has been failing. . . . Even here. . . . Perhaps a weariness too profound to be cured had fallen on them all. They had had to work incredibly hard, not to better themselves, only to keep their delicate balance between the natural and the human — in short, to remain French. The effort had become intolerable. It was easier to let go, to sleep. Neither their fear of invasion, nor the envy of certain of them for the wicked efficiency of the Germans, would have prevailed if it had not been for their weariness of being French, of their endless labour to be French. . . . Mourey did not believe this, but it was possible.

"No, I can't leave France," he said.

"Is that all?" Rienne asked.

"And Michèle," Mourey said. "Do you think I could leave her any more easily?"

Rienne saw him — in a future already too clear — risking himself and his honesty and his indestructible faith in the old civilised France against all the officials of a Government of Woerths and Thiviers. Risking his poor career and his poor pension. Risking even Michèle. . . . If anything good of the past were saved, it would be between the hands of these two of his friends. The future might come from other hands.

"So I can't take any of my friends?" he said lightly.

"Be careful," Letourneau said, smiling. "You're responsible for us. . . ."

When he told Agathe he was going, she said nothing.

This second separation was harder than the first because she knew now what she was losing — a kindness and a good-humour which were truly of her family. The twenty-five years following after the week when she had nursed him were a thin wadding between two happinesses. . . . I am sixty-three, she thought : what is in front of me is eternity. . . . If he comes back in October . . . three months to settle with the Germans, and a month to get back — she had only the vaguest notion where England was. . . .

"The autumn is very beautiful here," she said.

"I know," Rienne said.

"If it were a little later — if you come back in the winter — I can make a hare pâté, with a little laurel and a glass of Vouvray. I shall make it in the square earthenware dish, it's more convenient than the other."

"You'll be alone, Agathe. Is there anyone you would like to have with you during the war?"

A dark stain spread under the old woman's skin. "No one here."

"If you could—"

Hesitating, she told him about a day — how long since? forty years? — a young cousin had spoken to her and taken off a ribbon she was wearing to give it to her. She went away next day, and Agathe never saw her again. But if friendship was a warmth, a brightness as dazzling as the first rays of the sun on the horizon of the Loire, then Agathe knew all about it. . . . She asked timidly,

"And you, brother? Would you like to have one of your friends?"

"He was killed this afternoon."

Agathe did not dare ask his name.

"I hate war," she murmured. "The last one was bad enough. I felt such despair. I used to wake at night and think : They're killing each other over there. I know you wouldn't murder anyone, but I can't help thinking that men who kill each other are murderers."

"They are," Rienne said.

"And now," she said softly, "the village has been bombed, we have lost the war — we shall have the Germans here. But I don't despair any longer. I feel afraid — but, if you were not going, I should be happy. I am happy. Whatever is coming will not be too much ; we can manage hunger and misery, I hope."

Rienne looked at her with a little surprise. A clumsy big-boned woman in black, a peasant, her skin lined and blackened — with the railing gentleness of Anjou on her dry lips. She was the strength he was leaving, the courage he would return to seek. . . .

He left very early in the morning. The air was clear, with a feeling of rain. The village was still in its last night of independence, the last when an untimely knock on the door could only be a neighbour whose wife or his cow was ill. Everything was quiet. Everything was smooth, fresh — with the freshness of the Roman stones thriftily built into the parish church. He had only to close his eyes to see, with any of his other senses, the wall separating the Marie-Tillier's field from their cousins the Tillier-Debraye's, and Dellac the poacher stopping to make signs through the window to Dellac the village policeman. A child wakened by the car looked at him from a window; he knew its name because he knew which family belonged to this house. The same with those geese, great-great-grandchildren of the geese he remembered rippling under this gate.

Agathe had watched him from the doorway. He turned. She waved and went in. He heard the door of his house shut. . . . He heard two other sounds — a rake smoothing the gravel on a path, and, faintly and distinctly, the reveillé sounded in the barracks. At the other side of the Loire, the Germans had heard it. . . . His village was giving him, once more, these two French sounds, before it opposed to the invaders its silence and the lighter silence of its dead.

He had his back now to it — as he would always have.

Chapter 85

THE Germans entered Seuilly in the early afternoon; tanks, guns, trucks — full of scarlet-faced young men crowding the sides like tourists — turned along the Quai d'Angers to reach the old barracks, along the Quai Gambetta to park in the Place de la République, along the rue Rabelais and the Place de Verdun to line with their tanks both sides of the

Avenue du Maréchal Foch ; here they were astonished to find lime trees but not a single house higher than three stories, not an arch, not even a café . . . strange country, where the names of victorious generals are dismissed to streets of modest private houses. . . . The staff officer who set out, Baedeker in hand, to look for the Roman arch he had marked to visit, was amazed and offended to discover it at the end of an ill-smelling little rue Richelieu, and sprouting St.-John's-wort. He decided to move it. If these people had no natural reverence, they could learn the forms. . . .

In his capacity as Mayor and, the Prefect having fled, chief civilian authority, Labenne received the two German officers appointed to look after the town and region. He watched them arriving. For an instant, when he saw them step out of their car and, standing together, send a brief glance over the superb Renaissance gallery and its robust pillars, over the staircase and towered doorway, he was seized by a primitive agony and fear. For less than an instant — until he felt the spurt of joyous energy in his body. Thank God, he was equal to his appetites. He was, he knew, only at the beginning of months, years, of effort — stretching fully his suppleness, vitality, will. He was not going to make the mistake of doubting his bargain. Nor of justifying it. Even if he had to use his strength first on his own countrymen — why not ? No excuses are necessary for using a natural gift. . . . He was at ease in his future — his dear future. His corroding cynicism could not reach the only two human beings he loved. He was guarded on all sides — even against extinction. Even against boredom !

One of the Germans who came into his room was an old acquaintance — Major Landauer. Discreet, Labenne greeted him formally, but Landauer was open and friendly. The other, a Colonel Hellengrath, began at once the ceremony of taking over the command. He was correct, and a little patronising. Since this Frenchman was a man of goodwill, he could let himself feel the complacency of the victor, which before his own officers he repressed. A matter of discipline — they were not to think they could relax among these people, sly, decadent, with their restless hands and shrewd guarded eyes.

It was arranged for Major Landauer to take over the Town Hall ; and that Monsieur Labenne — of whose good sense the Colonel was delighted to receive proof — the better

to carry out the administrative changes that were needed, would move to the Prefecture. Provided that another and suitable residence were found for Colonel Hellingrath himself. His staff were taking over the Hôtel Buran, luckily not damaged in yesterday's foolish incident; he would prefer a private house where he could bring his wife.

Labenne gave way to a delicious spite. "You couldn't do better than Monsieur de Thiviers's house. . . . It will be no hardship to him, he can go to his family house near Luynes." He paused. "It's not important, his family house — but it should be lived in."

He surprised in himself a sudden anxiety for Thiviers's house at Luynes. It was a very small white château, built into the rocky hill above the river and above its own vines and mulberries; there were cellars in the rock. Old, it had far more the air of being immortal than any of the grand châteaux of this region: if they were ageless, it had the freshness and modesty of a good little child. And he was not anxious only about the house. Like the superb trees, the poplars of the Loire doubled by those of the Cher, like the vines and Spanish broom of this double valley, the Loire doubled by the other river, it sprang from a soil nursed by them, and with the same joyous strength. Like them it was a fountain of energy thrust into the clear air and pure suave light. Labenne had felt suddenly responsible for keeping it purely French. It was not his, it was Thiviers's. I'm giving him the chance to look after it, he thought with anger. If instead of going to Paris he lives there, I shan't touch him.

"Yes, he can go to Luynes," he said again, "and the sooner the better."

"We know a great deal about Monsieur de Thiviers," Hellingrath said. "No doubt you will tell us how far he can be relied on."

"As far as you are willing to acknowledge his importance," Labenne said, smiling.

The German looked at him with a gleam of respect. Son of a Bavarian mother, he knew a brutally sound peasant when he saw him. And Labenne's lack of elegance pleased him. He became almost genial. After a few minutes, satisfied that the Mayor was his man, he went off.

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Landauer stayed, and talked frankly. Unlike Hellingrath, he was not a professional soldier. He was a business-

man, he had none of a soldier's prejudices before Europe. He desired ardently the wiping out of all the obstacles, including frontiers, which guide a soldier during invasions, and which Hellingrath would regret. To Landauer, Europe was only the natural setting of banks, mines, factories, the real vigours of the future. He saw no reason to deny Labenne, a Frenchman, his share in it. To turn all Europe into an efficient unit — what a task ! Difficult enough to need any number of clever and ruthless executants.

"You can't stay here," he said warmly. "As soon as you've cleaned up the region, we shall need you in Paris. Or Berlin. . . . Our good Hellingrath imagines that the army will organise France. He would be hurt if I told him that his beloved army is only the nurse handing the surgeon his knife and rubber gloves. . . . Stukas and 88's are not surgical. What this country needs is experts. And not military ones. The Hellingraths know nothing ; their ideas of obedience, respect, discipline, are rigid enough to strangle our new Empire. We need a few diplomats like Bismarck, and an army of supple-minded economists, technicians, bankers, administrators. My dear Labenne, you will be invaluable ! "

Labenne pursed his thick lips. Behind his smile, he was listening with a cold ferocity of attention, seeking the weak point in this, his first German colleague. When Landauer began sneering at the professional soldier, he thought he had it. But, no, it was only the common form between politicians, not jealousy.

"Have you met any of our mystics ? " he asked. "The ladies and gentlemen who are planning a Catholic peasant France ? "

Landauer tapped his arm. "A peasant France is not so far from our idea for this country. Our Empire needs peasants, and yours are admirable. Like your soil. We have no time yet to nurse it, we shall have to cut down forests and force the crops. But for the time being we shall need Thiviers's works, we shall even improve them. Of course with our own money. That will give us control of the shares. Legal control — we're not robbers. Our good Hellingrath would no doubt seize them, he's a soldier of the old school. We don't do that sort of thing, we prefer an alliance — even forced ! And how astonished I shall be if French industrialists and bankers don't quickly come to

prefer a state of affairs which leaves them — under the discreet, oh, very discreet eye of one of our experts — the management of their property. Without crises or labour troubles. Men don't strike in our factories, let me tell you. . . .” He gave Labenne a shrewd glance. “Don't worry. The industries of the new German Empire have room for all exceptional men.”

Labenne had felt an obscure movement of rage — not unlike his brief anguish. He ignored it. He needed all his energy to feel his way. And in fact he felt a superb confidence. These Germans thought they had to do with a merely clever or merely crafty man. What idiots ! . . .

“I'm sure of it,” he said calmly.

Labenne watched him with an almost affectionate curiosity. “I understand that Monsieur de Thiviers has a fine collection of French paintings — Ingres, Renoirs. . . . We should like to offer for them.”

“Why not ?”

“You really don't mind ?” Landauer said, smiling.

“If you buy a few paintings ? Why should I ? When we want them, we can make others.” He was not exaggerating his indifference. So long as the country was not destroyed, so long as he and his children and his Thouédun were secure, much he cared where Monsieur Renoir's pictures went. There are always painters. “You can count on me in every way,” he said, with a slight emphasis. “I'm only anxious to see the end of disorder and weakness. In the language of realism — common to both our countries — France without Germany is nothing. With Germany, it can be a sound healthy province of Europe.”

“And what unique monuments in France !” Landauer cried. He smiled and lowered his voice. “And what women ! My dear fellow — not in the least beautiful — only exquisite !”

Labenne felt a pang of disillusion. The most vulgar weakness imaginable. He was disappointed to feel his first steps so easy. It started in him a contempt he should have mistrusted. But he was still avidly licking his new power and far from wondering whether a lust — any lust — is ever clear-sighted enough.

“And what is your general saying to our good honest Piriac ?” he asked.

“Oh, he'll know how to put the old fellow in his place,”

Landauer answered. "We don't co-operate with French soldiers, only with patriots."

.

At this moment Dr. Charles-Gouraud walked into his laboratory and found a German officer examining his "godchild". He had been out of town, settling his family in a village. As he drove into Seuilly, he saw the last German tanks crossing the bridge. He had to make a long detour to reach the works. He was too late.

The German turned quickly and Charles-Gouraud recognised him. A well-known young physicist. It was a little over four years since he visited the laboratory, bringing a letter of introduction from the German scientist who had been Charles-Gouraud's only German friend . . . "I send you my best pupil — he is the bearer of my *gratitude* to you and to France. . . ." He had underlined the word as, in order to call attention to them, he underlined mathematical signs in his letters. Obviously, it stood for something nobler than the simple word for friendship or kindness. . . . The pupil stayed a fortnight, charming his host with his childlike candour and enthusiasms.

He came forward with both hands out. "My dear colleague !"

Dr. Charles-Gouraud stepped back. "What are you doing here ?" He felt a sudden fury, and corrected himself. "Foolish of me. You'll forgive me — but I can only see an officer in the German army, not a colleague."

"How wrong you are," the German said pleasantly. "I'm a civilian in uniform, not a soldier. My job is the expert one of supervising the packing and despatch of scientific apparatus." He laid a caressing finger on the godchild. "This came high on my list," he said, smiling.

"Your list ?" Charles-Gouraud said.

He listened, a little dully. The German was telling him that four years ago he had been making a reconnaissance for his Government — the military term came naturally ; it was as natural as his frankness and charming smile — in French laboratories. Poor Charles-Gouraud ! But he was not the first person to learn that in German the word *gratitude* can stand for any number of things from spying to mass air raids. With despair, he realised that this intelligent man saw nothing to apologise for in his trick. Far from being

embarrassed, he was as proud of his cleverness as a child. He was two men, the honest scientist and the tribesman : they were not even at war with him, they used the same brain, hands, nerves.

The sense of unreality which follows a shock lifted. His despair dried up. I have a few minutes, he thought. His mind used them eagerly. Germany — what a paradox ! The only country in Europe where the instincts — hunger, cruelty, sacrifice — can count on being served by a coldly rational intelligence. When did it happen that every German became two men, or a man and an hysterical woman asking, "Do people like me ?" When did they begin their search for a Messiah, demanding from him only that his kingdom should be of this world ? By pushing it to its logical conclusion, they had discredited for ever the religion of Humanity ? Was that why they were created ? Yes. . . . His mind — he had only a minute left — made its first hurried movement. These things are not improvised, he thought, calmly. The world was created. . . .

He had moved, very slowly, until he was near enough his precious apparatus to swing at it with the wooden stool under his hand. The German shot him — a little awkwardly, he was after all a civilian — emptying his revolver into Charles-Gouraud's body. It stood for a second or two, then fell backwards. He could see the young German's face — nothing else. A sad business, if a blow over the heart could wipe out everything except one hateful image. What a world he was going to have to live in !

"It was your own fault," the German said, bending over him.

"You have saved me the trouble," Charles-Gouraud said. He imagined he was saying it.

Curiously enough, this was the first time the German had seen anyone die. He had a moment of anguish. He did not recognise it ; he thought the sun was making him giddy. What a fool, he said, looking furtively at the dead Frenchman ; he's missed his chance ; we should have used him.

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The Bishop of Seuilly had been summoned to see Major Landauer at six o'clock. He put aside the temptation to dignity. If by appearing before the Germans he could help his people, it was a trivial affair, trivial and ridiculous.

Nothing to disturb an old priest. Besides, he had noticed in his reading how often the step from a gently disappointing past to the cruelty of the future is bridged by a person of no importance — the telegraph boy bringing notice of a death, the starving inventor, the neglected poet. Attended only by his secretary, he went.

A little to his annoyance, he found that the German had prepared a long speech. No doubt — like the posters already on the walls, ordering people to trust the benefits of invasion — it was an issue. Since it concerned his duty, in which he did not need instruction from the invader, he gave up listening. With a little malice, he watched his secretary. He knew that Garnier expected him to treat the German as politely as if he were an anti-clerical Minister — I am going to alarm him, he thought, smiling. The Bishop of Euxerre had just died — and he knew that the Abbé was wondering how the end of the war could be turned to serve his dear ambition. My tiresome learned Garnier is a peasant, the Bishop thought. With a peasant's devotion to the fabric of the Church, its grandeur and body. He covets the Euxerre pasture. Obviously, if the Church were less likely to last than the land, he would never have given it his greedy love. . . . The Bishop was surprised to feel pity breaking through his mild dislike of Garnier. . . . How much disappointment and loss he will have to suffer before he opens his hands and lets everything fall. I daresay He needs a few priests who feel for His Church the sober greed of a peasant. . . . He looked at his secretary with an amused tenderness. . . . I must be growing very old and saintly, he thought. Or very foolish. . . .

He sighed. What a bore this German is ! . . . Landauer was talking about closing the cafés, in a voice at once smooth and metallic, like the noise of a wave breaking. He became sarcastic about the slackness of the French. . . . True, the Bishop thought. We were slack. But how pleasant it was ! Something imperfect and infinitely modest and arrogant and human splintered under the wave.

The German had finished his speech : he waited. " I trust I have made your duty clear," he said.

He expects me to thank him, the Bishop said to himself. What a savage !

" My duty has always been clear." He stood up. I only need strength, he reflected. And after all these years, He is

not going to deprive me of it. He looked at his secretary. Garnier, he saw, was longing to interrupt and show his tact and dignity. I shan't let him, he thought, with a return of his dry malice.

"Come, my son."

On their way out they ran into M. Huet, his face transformed by an indecent joy. He stopped, and said affably,

"Your Grace has beaten me. But I'm delighted to find you here. You share my feeling, no doubt."

The old Bishop was not able to restrain his repugnance for this man. "I doubt it very much."

"At least you agree with me that we are being offered a victory," the deputy said, smiling. "If we could have had it without German help, it would have been pleasanter. But let us be thankful we have it! . . . Frankly, I am doubly happy to see you here. I might so easily have found Monsieur Labenne!" His smile became very frank — it needed to, if suspicion were to be drawn away from the rest of his face. From his eyes especially. "A man not to be trusted, our Mayor. I suspect him of — in short, of treachery. He is a cynic, and a cynic will betray anyone."

Have I ever known anyone more loathsome and peculiar? the Bishop asked himself. He was less of a saint than he had just supposed.

"This is not a victory, Monsieur Huet. The war was a chastisement — we have all, all, sinned — but we have none the less been defeated."

"Ah," Huet said, "you misunderstand me. The victory is over our own unruly members — let us call them frankly the mob, then we can admit with a good conscience that we have been saved."

"The mob? We used to talk of the people," the Bishop interrupted. "If you are thinking of saving France from the common people, you are doing her a grave injury. The truth is — we have not been common enough."

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Mathieu's landlady ran upstairs, using all the force of her old body, to tell him that German soldiers were in the courtyard. She had heard one of them — the worst of all was that he spoke French — ask a neighbour which was his floor. "What are you going to do, Monsieur Mathieu?"

Mathieu remembered the poison he kept in a drawer of his desk, and took it out.

He decided not to take it. A phrase he had not thought of since he read it came, almost brutally, into his mind. . . . *Terror is not French.* . . . He withdrew his hand. Later, I shall be sorry I didn't kill myself, he thought coldly. He smiled. The frightened old woman did not recognise this young gentle smile ; she had never seen it in this room.

" You were in here dusting," Mathieu said. He pushed a cotton scarf into her hand.

The man who came into the room ahead of the German soldiers was French. For that reason he showed none of their curiosity and mistrust. He was at home. Ordering them to search the two rooms for money and papers, he pushed Mathieu, with a brutality which equalled that of Rimbaud, against a wall.

" All the money I have here is in a note-case in my pocket," Mathieu said.

He was going to take it out. Vayrac knocked him down quickly and stepped on his hand, crushing it. What pleasure this is giving you, Mathieu thought. With a lucid calm, he realised that the man leaning over his body was like him. . . . I despised men too much to want to hurt one of them : he hurts them so that he can enjoy despising them. . . .

" Be careful," he said, smiling. " This morning I set a mousetrap on the floor of the cupboard." It was his landlady who had set it, but he was anxious not to draw attention to her.

" Are you finding this amusing ? " Vayrac said.

" One of your friends might have caught his fingers," Mathieu said lightly.

All the gaiety he had ignored in his life was making frantic signals to him. He saw them and smiled. Always so careful not to confuse one thing with another, keeping them apart with all the force of its strict logic, his mind overwhelmed him suddenly with likenesses : he saw that his landlady resembled like a sister the fourteenth-century figure of Saint Madeleine in the Abbey Church, she was holding the improvised duster against her breast with an air of surprised grief worthy of an alabaster box ; a double crack in the ceiling was the Loire with its blond islands — it was really the Loire, in spite of the smell in the room of uniforms and hate ; and now for the first time he saw how exactly, in

its lack of taste and luxury, his room resembled a million rooms in France and this minute a million minutes, past and to come, in which a grief and a dishonour past bearing had been, would be, borne. How? By France choosing to resemble France, and succeeding to perfection. . . . Now he felt only a sober indifference. He thought for less than a moment of Uhland. . . . He could have given Rienne a message for me. . . . It never entered his head that Rienne had forgotten to deliver it. . . . After all, he's a Boche, he thought gently. . . . Is it because I am a Jew that I see Seuilly, and France, as at the same time part of me and separate? Am I the only person who carries them about like a burden, like a child — like a friend? Never easily. Never without feeling the weight of them.

Vayrac pulled him up, dragging on his crushed hand.

"Make the most of your hour," Mathieu said.

As he left it he looked round his room; the clearest thing in it was his landlady's face. How handsome she must have been, he thought. Crossing the courtyard, he thought: I never thanked her for coming to warn me. Even in his regret he was glad to think that, old, poor, strong, she had not been too afraid. You can trust them, he thought.

Chapter 86

TOWARDS midnight of this same day, the 19th, Lucien was moving slowly — how slowly — along the road towards Châtillon. He could see nothing. It was pitch dark, and it rained. The darkness had changed itself into a hideous geometry. It moved sluggishly against him, cubes giving birth to solid rectangles of shadow, swallowing others, black profiles on blackness, a Walpurgis-night of engines and cries. He nodded forward, asleep; his motor-cycle ran against the car in front, he woke, the earth carried him forward with it, jerking him from side to side as though it were crossing tram-lines, he woke again. . . . The rain — until now he had only felt it — was visible, a grey shadow moving across the others. Lorries separated themselves from cars and tanks;

he could see the trees drawing away in front of him along the sides of the road. . . . A terrific clatter. The Germans were bombing a place not nearer than fifteen kilometres. They dropped flares. A harsh sunlight swept over the greyness ; he saw the column jerking itself like a goods train between trees and hedges ; a village on fire opened out in the rain like an enormous dahlia. . . . The bombing stopped.

It was now almost light. Turning a corner, he could see a cross-roads ahead. At the far side a car, overturned in a ditch, was lying with its wheels in the air. The dress of a woman laid on the grass verge was spread out like linen put to dry. The man bending over her made no attempt to get help from any of the passing cars ; perhaps he realised the folly of trying to halt one drop of a flood. He was kneeling, with his back to the traffic. In the moment before he turned his head, Lucien recognised Bergeot. Mme de Freppel, as he saw when he was lifting his machine into the ditch, was dead.

She was lying with her arms spread out, bent so that her hands lay on the ground above her head. One hand was gloved, the fingers of the other were closed gently, thumb outside. Her eyes were closed, and the look of patience had escaped from them over her cheeks.

Without speaking, Bergeot stood up. Lucien realised that he wanted his help to carry her into the field. When he touched her he was shocked to feel that she must have been dead for some hours. Her cheeks were cold and hard. Yet he felt sorry to lay her on the soaked grass.

He noticed that the rain ran off her face in firm hard drops.

"When ?" he asked. For his life, he could not have spoken gently.

"A little before dark last night," Bergeot said. He frowned, dragging each word into its place with mistrust. "She was driving. She turned too sharply to avoid a lorry coming the other way. The only thing we met. It might have been sent on purpose. . . . I took her out . . . she was dead."

He was pitifully tired. Lucien looked away from him, with a feeling of constraint and boredom. His affection for this broken man belonged to a self he had forgotten completely — in two days. To avoid having to answer, he

walked to the road and tried to stop a military ambulance crawling past. The driver shouted that he had a full load. It was the same with the next, and the next. He went back into the field.

When he looked at Marguerite, a feeling of grief seized him. For the first time he realised that she would never laugh or stretch her arms again. His throat hardened. How terrible death is, he thought, as though he had made a discovery. He looked fixedly at the long grass, and was struck by the colours sparkling in it — blue, violet, orange. It was the first level rays of the sun arriving.

"We must do something," he said, speaking with a clumsy authority. "You can't go on waiting here."

Bergeot was looking at the road. "What can I do?" He glanced at the young man with indifference. "I've nothing left. I'm done for." He frowned. "I did for myself," he said.

Lucien did not answer. He was embarrassed by the older man's grief and collapse. He did not understand it, and besides, there was nothing he could say.

The rain had stopped. The sky moved further off suddenly, and the column of lorries shrank. It was full daylight. With an angry impatience he reflected that if he waited a little longer the German army would catch up with him. But he did not know how to go away. Bergeot asked abruptly,

"Where are you making for?"

"La Rochelle."

"You must go. They're across the Loire by now. They must be. . . . Here. . . ." He took out a handful of folded notes from his pocket. "You'd better take some of this. I'm sure you haven't any money — or not enough."

Lucien felt an impulse of relief and joy — he had less than a hundred francs — but he was ashamed.

"I don't need it," he said awkwardly.

"Nonsense," Bergeot said, with sudden energy. "Take it, take it. Do you think I stole it?"

The young man mumbled a phrase which did not make sense even in his own ears, and turned to go. He had never felt more insignificant or younger. . . . Just as he reached the road a lorry had stopped. The driver, starting-handle in hand, was getting down. Except for a few cases, his lorry was empty. Lucien seized his arm.

"You can take two people — a man and a woman? You must. She's dead."

The man laughed at him. "And you think I look like an undertaker? Thanks. Yesterday I was taken for a midwife. All right, where is she?"

The drivers of cars and lorries he was holding up began to shout at him to get on. He took no notice, except to thumb his nose, and helped Lucien to lift Marguerite and lay her on the floor of the lorry. The last thing you'll want me to do for you, Lucien thought, but without any feeling. He was surprised when a tear ran down his cheek. . . . I could certainly have been more polite the other evening. . . . Bergeot was climbing, stiffly, like an old man, into the lorry.

"What will you do — after?" Lucien asked him, embarrassed.

Bergeot made a vague gesture and did not answer. . . .

Late that night Lucien reached Chantonay, and turned off along a bad road, almost a track — the parish was not lucky with its roads — to La Croisée.

He could not leave France without warning his mother. She had made too many sacrifices to give him the chance which had come to nothing. Or to this flight. She will be heartbroken, he thought: I must think of something I can say to give her courage.

The village, when he reached it, was in full darkness. If he had not known it better than anything else, he would have fallen a dozen times in the narrow street: there was always a barrel outside the Trichets, and the gutters running across the road were deep enough to drown a cat. Pushing his machine — not to rouse the village — he plunged into this silence full of tiny sounds, the creak of Jean-Marie Yvet's neglected shutters, the stream murmuring behind the old houses like a child; full, too, of smells faithful to their places in La Croisée: any ghost choosing to return would be able to find his way by that one of his senses as clearly as if he could see.

Lucien turned right at the cross, skirting the great buttresses of the church without seeing them, watching, profiled on the dark sky, the darker roofs, not two of a height, nor even two pitched alike, stepping over the invisible roots of the beech La Croisée had defended against eight generations of road inspectors — short generations, very easily defeated by the least docile peasants, true chouans, in

